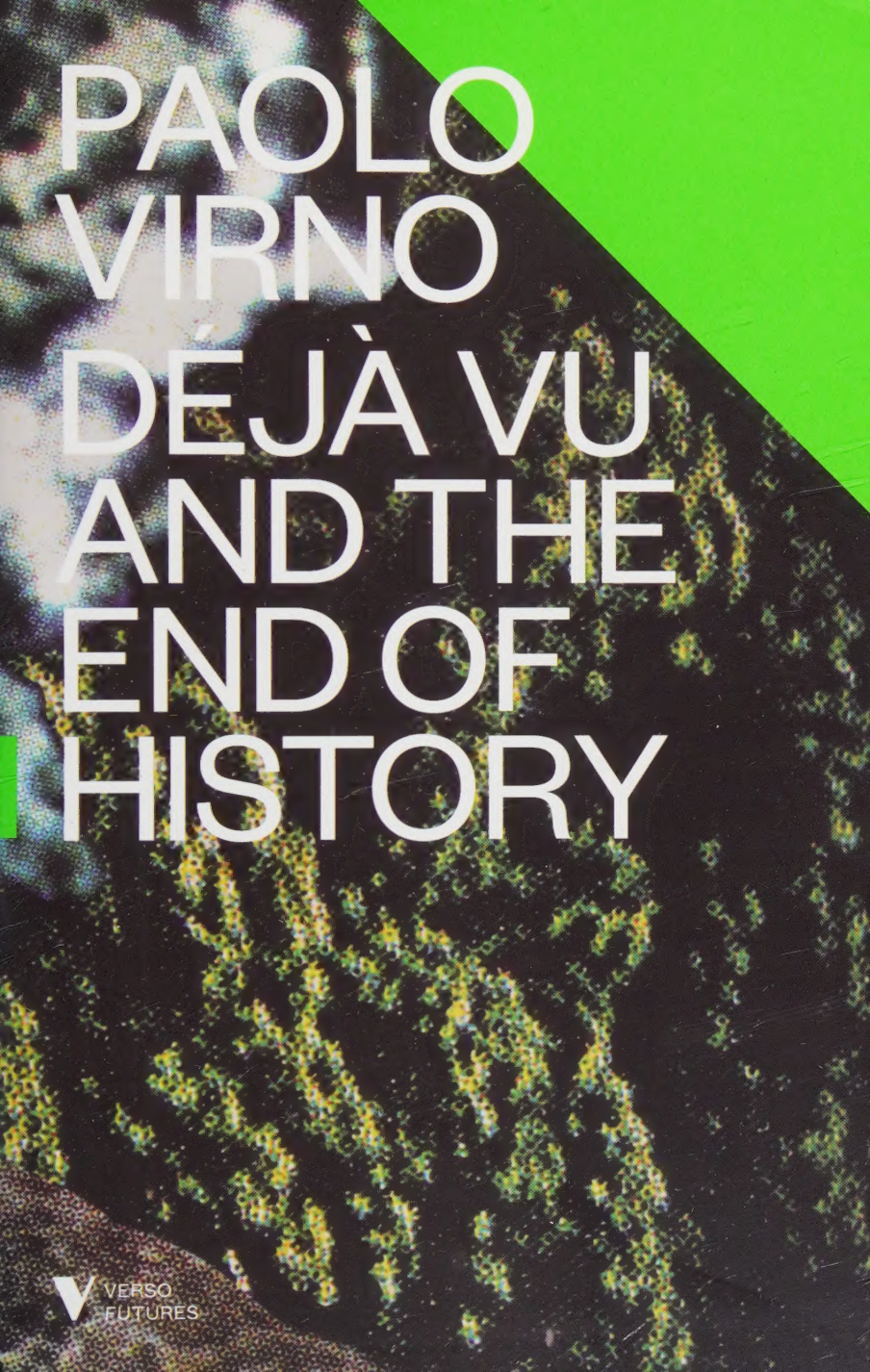
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Déjà Vu and the End of History

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The law of the innermost form of the essay is heresy.
– Theodor Adorno

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Déjà Vu and the End of History

Paolo Virno

Translated by
David Broder

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For Lucio Castellano—*in memoriam*

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Part I

Déjà vu and the End of History

I returned there
Where I had never been
Nothing has changed from how it wasn't
Giorgio Caproni

Premise

The initial scope of these pages is to test the waters of the relation between the theory of memory and the philosophy of history. The functioning of the mnestic faculty, its performances and pathologies, may perhaps be able to provide us with categories and a lexicon able to give account of historical experience, now that the 'bordello of historicism' (as Walter Benjamin put it, not too tactfully[1]) has pulled up the shutters.

This theme lends itself to a number of ambiguities. We should shake off at least some of these immediately. First off, we are certainly not going to set about comparing the collective past to Proust's Combray, or reducing the challenge of historiography to nibbling on *petites madeleines*. To miniaturise history, hemming it into the cassock of 'lived experience', is a miserable fallback solution, one that should be given a wide berth. Such a response is simply the prophylactic measure (or expedient consolation prize) of those who, whatever their recalcitrance, have proven unable to free themselves from the spell of the historicist 'bordello'. Here, instead, we want to trace out a totally different path. Rather than constipate the *res*

1 Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', Thesis XVI, at marxists.org: 'The historical materialist cannot do without the concept of a present which is not a transition, in which time originates and has come to a standstill. For this concept defines precisely *the* present in which he writes history for his person. Historicism depicts the "eternal" picture of the past; the historical materialist, an experience with it, which stands alone. He leaves it to others to give themselves to the whore called "Once upon a time" in the bordello of historicism. He remains master of his powers: man enough, to explode the continuum of history.'

gestae and the narration of them within the limits of biographical commemoration, we need to grasp the non-psychological, supra-personal, public significance of the concepts with which we analyse the formation – as well as the deterioration – of memory.

But what do we mean, when we speak of the supra-personal meaning of mnestic processes? Here a second ambiguity comes into view, opposed to and mirroring the first. It is called 'historical memory'. As we know, this formula is used to designate awareness of events that have taken place and of their lasting influence on actuality. But we are grappling with a misleading metaphor here: we ought instead to speak of historical culture or consciousness, rather than of memory. And yet, mind, it is precisely in order to determine the forms – but also the crisis – of such consciousness or culture (and, therefore, of this 'historical memory' itself) that it is perhaps necessary for us to turn back to the conceptual constellation pertaining . . . to memory, in the strict sense (the memory with which each person is endowed from infancy). As such, from the outset this ambiguous little formula takes for granted precisely the problem that it poses, one that is still to be answered. Memory is not 'historical' in virtue of the particular content (for example, the social or political content) of memories. Rather, it is historical in that it is that *faculty* that distinguishes individual existence. Indeed, the structure and processes of this faculty provide an access route to the historicity of experience – of any experience, of experience in general. Memory, which is always memory of the particular, however, constitutes a sort of 'ontogenetic recapitulation' of the various modes of being historical, as well as the formal matrix of historiographical categories. Precisely

and only in this sense does it have a supra-personal value and a public character.[2]

I will give a few examples which are useful in terms of how we look at this problem. Psychiatrists and neurobiologists[3] count among the causes of memory-loss two types of *interference*: the first, which they call *retroactive*, is the disturbance that a new piece of information

2 As we know, Rousseau elaborated the fundamental concept of his political philosophy by invoking an existential faculty, *will*, though it had always seemed the most intimate, personal and secret faculty of all. Rousseau spoke of a *volonte générale*. Less well known but just as significant (and, we might say, a lot more perspicacious) was Marx's recourse to the faculty of *intellect* to point to society's greatest potential, that which the single producers already had in common. Marx spoke of a *general intellect*. We ought to consider the faculty of *memory* none too differently. As we say in the main text, we do so with the objective of finding adequate categories for thinking historical experience, and more radically, the *historicity of experience*. Will-Politics, Intellect-social relations, Memory-historicity? The first connection sparks doubt – a substantial one – but not the other two. The study of existential faculties in order to understand what about them is more supra-personal (or less 'private') has an all-important precedent in book X of Augustine's *De Trinitate*. There, he established an analogy (or better, an isomorphism) between the Father and memory, the Son and the intellect, and the Holy Spirit and will. Augustine does not consider memory, which imperfectly imitates the characteristics of the Father, to be just any kind of faculty, comparable to the others: rather, it coincides with the entire life of the mind; it is the ambit, or context, in which all the particular faculties are inscribed, starting with will and the intellect. Memory goes beyond the other human aptitudes in the very same way that 'being' goes beyond (and itself comprises) every other category. Moreover, in the thirteenth book of his *Confessions*, Augustine compared the Trinity to three prerogatives of the rational creature: *being* (instead of memory), knowing and willing. On this point, see below, Part II, section 8.

3 On the neurobiologists' literature on memory, we are referring above all to Steven Rose, *The Making of Memory*, London: Bantam Press 1992; Gerald Edelman, *The Remembered Present*, New York: Basic Books 1989; and Israel Rosenfield, *The Invention of Memory*, New York: Basic Books 1988.

introduces into the memory of a prior event; the second, *proactive* interference is, instead, the obstacle inherent in the currently[4] lived situation to memorising what will follow it. It is obvious enough what significance the study of the different types of 'interference' could have for the philosophy of history. Similarly, looking at the arena of historiography, it is not difficult to work out the relevance of the distinction between *procedural memory* (the past congealed in *savoir faire* or habit, conserved as a technique or ethos) and *semantic memory* (the explicit re-evocation of signs and meanings that are inherent to long-ago experiences). And, moreover, consider how prehensile and perspicacious notions such as the following could prove: *hypermnesia* (increasing mnestic capacity in the event of crisis or trauma); *cryptomnesia* (to substitute a suddenly reflowering memory for a completely new idea); or *allomnesia* (to attribute to a past experience a content or context different to its real ones). Ultimately, might it not be the case that the old question raised by Augustine, of what the 'memory of a memory' is – and, above all, what the 'memory of having forgotten' is[5] – concerns the very core of all historical thought?

We shall dedicate the following pages, however, to one mnestic phenomenon only: namely, what we call the déjà vu. We do this out of the conviction that this specific pathology of memory can cast new light on a canonical theme of historical-philosophical reflection, which is also a pervasive, overbearing state of mind characteristic of the contemporary forms of life. This philosophical theme

4 [*Attuale* means both 'current' and 'actual'. In all cases of either word or variants on them in this book, Virno is using this same stem. – TN]

5 Augustine, *Confessions*, Book X, Chapters 13 and 16, at ccel.org.

– now also a recklessly advancing mood – is the theme of history stopping, or, more radically, the *end of history*.

1. Watching Themselves Live[6]

When psychiatrists refer to déjà vu, they do not mean a known event of the past playing out again, accompanied by either euphoric amazement or bored condescension. Rather, here we have an only apparent repetition, one that is entirely illusory. We believe that we have already experienced (or seen, heard, done, etc.) something that is, in fact, happening for the first time at this very moment. We mistake the current experience for the very faithful copy of an original that never really existed. We believe that we are recognising something of which we are only now cognisant. As such, we could also describe déjà vu in terms of 'false recognition'.

Déjà vu does not entail a defect of memory, nor its qualitative alteration. Rather, it means the untrammelled extension of memory's jurisdiction, of its dominion. Rather than limit itself to preserving traces of times past, memory also applies itself to actuality, to the evanescent 'now'. The instantaneous present takes the form of memory, and is re-evoked even as it is taking place. But what can 'remembering the present' mean, except having the irresistible sensation of having already experienced it previously? Inasmuch as it is an object of memory, the 'now' is camouflaged as the already-been, and is thus duplicated in an imaginary 'back then', in a fictitious 'other-then'. It goes without saying that between the

6 [A reference to Luigi Pirandello. – TN]

current event, considered a mere repeat, and the phantom original prototype, there is no mere analogy, but rather the most complete identity. The present and the pseudo-past, which have the same perceptual and emotional content, are indistinguishable. The consequence is a troubling one: every act and every word that I say and do *now* seems destined to repeat, step by step, the course that was fixed back then, without the possibility of omitting or changing anything. As Henri Bergson put it in *Le souvenir du présent et la fausse reconnaissance*: '*We feel that we choose* and will, but that we are choosing what is imposed on us and willing the inevitable.'[7]

The state of mind correlated to déjà vu is that typical of those set on *watching themselves live*. This means apathy, fatalism, and indifference to a future that seems prescribed even down to the last detail. Since the present is dressed in the clothes of an irrevocable past, these people must renounce any influence on how the present plays out. It is impossible to change something that has taken on the appearances of memory. As such, they give up on action. Or, better, they become *spectators* of their own actions, almost as if these were part of an already-known and unalterable script. They are dumbfounded spectators, sometimes ironic and often inclined to cynicism. The individual at the mercy of the déjà vu is her own epigone. To her eyes, the historical scansion of events is suspended or paralysed; the distinction between 'before' and 'after', cause and effect, seems futile and even derisory.

The phenomenon of 'false recognition' allows us to

7 Henri Bergson, 'Memory of the Present and False Recognition', in *Key Writings*, London: Continuum 2002, p. 149.

decipher critically the fundamental idea of every philosophy of history: the end, the exhaustion or the implosion of history itself. Above all, it allows us to settle accounts with the contemporary – that is, 'postmodern' – version of this idea, which descends from a noble lineage and complicated family tree. According to Baudrillard and his miniature disciples, history thins out to the point of vanishing when the millenarian aspiration to wipe out the duration of time (and, with this, any irritating delays) appears to have been satisfied by the instantaneousness of information, real-time communications, and by the desire to lay 'hold of things almost before they have taken place'.[8] And yet the affirmation of an eternal present, a centripetal and despotic *actuality*, is provoked by déjà vu, namely by the form of experience in which there prevails – as Bergson put it – 'the feeling that *the future is closed*, that the situation is detached from everything although I am attached to it'.[9] In capricious, rampant years of history, Karl Mannheim prophesied: 'It is possible . . . that in the future, in a world in which there is never anything new, in which all is finished and each moment a repetition of the past, there can exist a condition in which thought is utterly devoid of all ideological and utopian elements.'[10] A post-historical situation, then; but also, at the same time, a condition marked by the mnestic pathology of which we have already spoken: 'there is never anything new . . . each moment [is] a repetition of the past'.

8 Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1994, p. 9.

9 Bergson, 'Memory of the Present and False Recognition', p. 155.

10 Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, London: Routledge 1936, pp. 235–6.

Now, however, we need to interrupt this game of assonances and analogies. To understand the increasing fragility of historical experience and, at the same time, to refute the mediocre ideologies that set up camp on this terrain, it is necessary to observe more closely the actual texture of 'false recognition'. What clay is a *memory of the present* made of? How is it formed? What does it reveal?

2. The Memory of the Present

It is Bergson whom we must thank for the most incisive analysis of déjà vu, perhaps the only philosophically significant analysis of this question (also not without interest, albeit too generic and rhapsodic, is Ernst Bloch's 'Bilder des Déjà vu').[11] It is worth again running through the salient stages of Bergson's analysis, picking out two or three concepts that can be developed further in autonomy of the others. First of all, our attention shall turn to the aforementioned essay *Le souvenir du présent et la fausse reconnaissance*, though this will also be read against the backdrop of Bergson's greatest work on memory, namely *Matière et mémoire*. We will then go on to pay significant attention to a text that does not seem to have much to do with mnestic processes, *Le possible et le réel*.[12]

11 Ernst Bloch, 'Bilder des Déjà Vu', in *Werkausgabe*, vol. 9, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1965. At the end of his essay on déjà vu, Bloch adds an appendix relating a conversation he had with Walter Benjamin 'in some dive in Marina Grande [on Capri]' in 1924, regarding this mnestic pathology. This account was drawn up by both interlocutors.

12 Henri Bergson, 'Le possible et le réel', originally published in the Swedish review *Nordisk Tidskrift* in November 1930, then included

According to Bergson, 'the important thing to know . . . is not why [déjà vu] arises in certain persons at particular moments, but why it is not being produced at every moment in everybody'.[13] We are not grappling, then, with an anomaly or degeneration, but with an aspect of 'normal memory' that usually, however, remains completely hidden. It is perturbing, if not even pathological, when this habitual concealment is suddenly removed. We could say: déjà vu is a moment of truth in the functioning of memory: it makes its appearance when this functioning is shown for what it really is, pure and unadulterated.

The formation of memory, Bergson maintains, '*is never posterior to the formation of perception; it is contemporaneous with it*'.[14] Far from being the blurred copy or the belated spectre of immediate experience, the mnestic trace is its inevitable correlate. If 'between the perception and the memory there seems to be a difference of intensity or degree, but not of nature' (if, that is, memory were the residue of perception), then that would rule out their being coextensive and simultaneous. But – and this is a point of capital importance – memory exhibits a *difference of nature* as compared to perception, and, at the same time, an equal intensity. It captures the same current moment as perception does, but in an essentially different manner. The fleeting present is always grasped in two distinct and concomitant aspects (which are concomitant precisely because they are distinct): 'What is duplicating itself at each moment into perception and memory is the

in PUF's 1938 Paris edition of *La pensée et le mouvant*. English translation appears in Bergson, *Key Writings* as 'The Possible and the Real'.

13 Bergson, 'Memory of the Present and False Recognition', p. 143.

14 Ibid., p. 144.

totality of what we are seeing, hearing and experiencing, all that we are with all that surrounds us. As we are becoming conscious of this duplication, it is the entirety of our present which must appear to us at once as perception and as memory.'[15]

The typical symptom of déjà vu – namely, the re-evocation of what is happening right now – is also the condition of possibility of memory in general. There would be no memory at all, if it were not, first of all, memory of the present. But, then, why is déjà vu the exception and not the rule? Why is it 'not being produced at every moment in everybody'? Bergson responds: between the two heterogeneous forms in which we understand the *hic et nunc*, the impulse to action always and on each occasion privileges the perception-form to the detriment of the memory-form. Or, better: 'attention to life' (another name for the practical impulse oriented towards the future) does interpellate the mnestic patrimony, but only in order to extract from it that information which is of use to the impending tasks as posed by perception. And what is any less useful to an action that is underway, than the memory of the present? This has 'nothing to teach us, being only the double of perception . . . This is why there is no memory from which our attention is more obstinately turned away.'[16] Thus the fundamental fact that we remember what is happening, *while it is happening*, disappears from view. Though very normal – indeed, inevitable – this aspect is left misunderstood and neglected. The true structure of memory again appears, conversely, when 'attention to life' declines and the taste for action is

15 Ibid., p. 148.
16 Ibid., p. 153.

soured. Only then, in a moment of crisis, does the memory of the present acquire significance.

Déjà vu is seemingly provoked, then, when the tension of life unexpectedly goes away: and it is from this that its exceptional and troubling character derives. Yet this is not a very compelling explanation. Indeed, we already know that 'false recognition' coincides with a state of apathy and indifference: however, to attribute its genesis to a lack of 'attention to life' (that is, indeed, to apathy and indifference) is a vicious circle, or at least a tautology. As further proof: there is nothing stopping us from turning this causal link on its head, blaming déjà vu (the purported effect itself) for the paralysis of action and disinterest for the future that were meant to explain its own appearance. This is the tendency of the argument that Nietzsche pursues in the second of his *Untimely Meditations* (a text to which we will later return) where he asserts that the hypertrophy of memory will always cause some 'damage to life'.

We need to stick more closely to the phenomenon of memory, if we are to avoid falling into tautologies and vicious circles. The déjà vu should be understood (and defined and explained) only on the basis of what this phenomenon calls into question, and without looking for support from extrinsic factors. Let us repeat. The memory of the present is juxtaposed to the perception of the present. It is precisely in their simultaneous, co-extensive reference to the same object that memory and perception demonstrate their heterogeneity. We can no longer say that memory looks to 'back then' and perception to 'now', but rather must admit that there is a perceived present and a present that exists in memory. What are the characteristic traits of each of them, and in which regards

are they not even comparable? What is the difference 'in nature, not degree', between memory and perception?

3. Actual and Virtual

In his essay on the déjà vu, Bergson writes: 'Our actual existence, then, whilst it is unrolled in time, duplicates itself all along with a virtual existence, a mirror-image. Every aspect of our life presents two aspects, it is actual and virtual, perception on the one side and memory on the other. Each moment of life is split up as and when it is posited. Or rather, it consists in this very splitting.'[17] This is just a laconic note, and is not later developed. It is enough, however, to suggest a thesis of some significance: perception fixes the present as real, complete, resolved in unambiguous given facts; whereas memory limits it within the terms of mere potential, retaining something of its *virtual* character. The difference between the two forms with which we grasp hold of our 'now' is, therefore, a *modal difference*: the modality of the possible or the modality of the real, memory of potential or perception of the act. In the déjà vu, both modalities join side-by-side and operate in unison, rather than neutralising each other or alternating. That is, in one and the same event we have the paradoxical coexistence of the real and the possible. This event simultaneously seems actual and potential: but, mind, this is the potential of its own act, of itself *qua* act (and not an act due to result from it); and, conversely, this is the act of its own potential, of itself *qua* potential (and not of some prior potential). Rarely would

17 Ibid., p. 147.

we experience a situation in which the virtual and the real fully overlap. The synchronic operation of the two different modalities could provoke a hypnotic effect, dilating and congealing the immediate *hic et nunc*.

A thesis of this kind (only in some small part possible to infer from Bergson's text) suddenly raises quite a jumble of problems. We must ask: why on earth should the possible present itself with the aspect of memory? Even when it concerns the instantaneous present, memory places 'the mark of the past' on its representation. And is it not bizarre to claim that the past is the chosen abode of the virtual? Bizarre to claim that precisely the past, that miserable cadaster of '*faits accomplis*', constitutes the temporal dimension of the modality of the possible? Are we not, perhaps, more used to projecting the potential, that which does not yet exist, into the future? More used to considering it the object of expectation and prediction, and never as some chest of reminiscences?

To understand in what sense the virtual takes the *form* of the past, thus becoming the prerogative of memory, it is worth lending our attention to another essay by Bergson, *Le possible et le réel*. This is, apparently, a text unconnected to his comments on 'false recognition'; indeed, the mnestic faculty is not mentioned even in general terms. And yet it seems sensible – or rather, necessary – to compare them. Bergson refutes the mainstream opinion according to which a) the possible *precedes* the real, its substitute in embryo; b) it is something *less* than the real, since even if it fully resembles it, it lacks the decisive requisite of existence. These are two correlated misunderstandings, which mutually feed one another. On closer view, Bergson says, an event becomes possible only

in the moment in which it is realised.[18] The virtual is contemporaneous to the actual, arises with and duplicates it. Nevertheless, in duplicating the real, the possible detaches itself into the past, and establishes itself there with a *retroactive movement*: 'As reality is created . . . its image is reflected behind it into the indefinite past; thus it finds that it has from all time been possible, but it is at this moment that it begins to have been always possible.'[19]

When a certain fact takes place, we not only perceive its reality but also feel the texture of its potential. But the being-possible of the fact, though it concerns the present, appears as having-*been*-possible: through a systematic *anachronism*, that is. Precisely because it is retrospectively located in a previous time, in the virtual there is more – not less – than in the actual: 'the possible is only the real with the addition of an act of mind which throws its image back into the past'.[20] Bergson does not offer any specification of this 'act of mind' in which the modality of the possible is incardinated. However, it seems legitimate to give an unambiguous answer to this question. *Memory* is the mechanism that confers a potential (incomplete,

18 Bergson, 'The Possible and the Real', *Key Writings*, p. 230: 'Thus in judging that the possible does not presuppose the real, one admits that the realization adds something to the simple possibility: the possible would have been there from all time, a phantom awaiting its hour; it would therefore have become reality by the addition of something, by some transfusion of blood or life. One does not see that the contrary is the case, that the possible implies the corresponding reality with, moreover, something added, since the possible is the combined effect of the reality once it has appeared and of a condition which throws it back in time. The idea imminent in most philosophies and natural to the human mind, of possibles which would be realised by an acquisition of existence, is therefore pure illusion.'

19 Ibid., p. 229.

20 Ibid.

contingent) character on actual reality by throwing it back into the past. To be precise, this mechanism is the *memory of the present*: namely, that which 'is in the past in its form and of the present in its matter'.[21] This is solely due to the inevitable anachronism, which always establishes the virtual afresh. Bergson writes: 'the possible is . . . the mirage of the present in the past'.[22] Meaning: the possible is the *hic et nunc* made into an object of memory, placed under the sign 'back then', re-evoked in the very moment in which it is lived. The order of potential comes into alignment with the order of memory, to the point of total identification. The symmetrical errors usually committed with regard to each of the two (believing that memory *follows* perception, believing that the possible *precedes* the real) require a single correction. The virtual is simultaneous to the actual *because* memory is simultaneous to perception.

If we consider *Le possible et le réel* in isolation, we get the impression that Bergson denied the modality of the possible any autonomous value. The potentially existing is nothing but a reverberation of the really existing, its image anachronistically transposed onto the past. As such, he seems to echo the theses of the ancient Megarian philosophers, criticised by Aristotle in *Metaphysics*,[23] according to whom it was necessary to consider possible only 'what is or will be'. Yet things change as soon as we connect the theme of the virtual to the theme of memory (and, in particular, to analysis of the déjà vu). We know that memory can boast of a difference 'in nature, not

21 Bergson, 'Memory of the Present and False Recognition', p. 148.

22 Bergson, 'The Possible and the Real', p. 229.

23 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, IX, 1046b 28–1047a 29, at classics.mit.edu.

degree' with regard to perception. It is a peculiar, irreducible and non-derivative way of grasping the present. But we also know that the possible, having the *form* of the past, is structured as a memory (where, conversely, the real is totally at one with perception). As such, there is also a *difference of nature, not degree* between the potential and the actual: the two modalities, even though they often share the same experiential content, are separated by an unbridgeable hiatus. Far from being liquidated or debased, potential reaches its very acme precisely when it persists as potential alongside the corresponding act. The difference in its nature precludes any assimilation, instead implying its independence: the possible is not cancelled out by the real, as if it were a temporary interlude, but rather represents another way of being, substantial in itself.

The phenomenon of the déjà vu now acquires greater splendour. It (like the idea of an 'end of history', as we shall see) concerns the experience of the possible, or better, its pervasive metastasis. The critical point lies in the transformation of a 'memory of the present' into a 'false recognition': in the former, the virtual comes to light, and is compared side-by-side with the actual; in the latter, conversely, it is abrogated in the most drastic matter, since it assumes the aspect of something *that has already been real*, of an act that occurred previously. Déjà vu arises when the past-*form*, applied to the present, is exchanged for a past-*content*, which the present will repeat with obsessive loyalty – that is to say, when the *possible*-present is exchanged for a *real*-past. It is difficult to experience the coexistence of the virtual and the actual, certainly, but it has nothing pathological about it *per se*. The (mnestic *and* historical) pathology consists, rather, in

the dissimulation of the coexistence that we have now outlined, in veiling or exorcising the difficulty that this entails. 'False recognition' protects from the burden of the possible, so to speak, the very thing that 'the memory of the present' signals.

4. The Temporality of the Possible

It is in the past that we find the centre of gravity of the temporality of potential. This is still something of an enigma, however. In order to illustrate its meaning and significance, it is worth asking ourselves, first of all, what past it concerns, and how the perennial 'having been' of the virtual is articulated. This is nothing more than a morphological description, on the basis of which we can then address the important question: to what experience or way of being does such a 'back then' correspond?

The past in which the possible is inscribed is neither recent nor remote: in *Le possible et le réel*, Bergson speaks of a '*passé indéfini*', of an incalculable '*de tout temps*', a formless other-then.[24] And in *Le souvenir du present*, we read that in false recognition, the memory is never located at a specific point in the past, but rather in 'the *past in general*'. What is at issue here is not this or that former present, with its own unique countenance, but rather a simple 'before' that cannot be circumscribed within any chronological order: 'a past that has no date and can have none'.[25] The past-in-general accompanies every actuality like an aura – without, though, itself having ever been

24 Bergson, 'The Possible and the Real', p. 230.
25 Bergson, 'Memory of the Present and False Recognition', p. 148.

actual. It is, therefore, the pure *form* of anteriority that is here at work. It is an *a priori* form, with the capacity to subordinate any experience whatsoever to itself: not just that which has already been, but also current experience and what is now to come. We ought to recognise that 'a representation can bear the mark of the past independently of what it represents'.[26]

If representation concerns a particular (dateable, defined) past, the past-form so closely adheres to its object that it goes almost unperceived. Conversely, where the 'now' is depicted as the 'back then' (namely, where we have a memory of the present) the past-in-general sticks out in sharp relief. The déjà vu is its epiphany. Moreover, the past-form also corresponds to the representation of the future. How? Whenever we adopt the future perfect tense of a verb, the future seems to be emptied out, locked away: 'I will have enjoyed', 'I will have had many opportunities', and so on. In all such cases, what does not yet exist is put behind us, and we include it in the past-in-general, making it a matter of memory. The future perfect is the *memory of what is to come*.[27]

26 Ibid., p. 150.

27 The future perfect verb tense is of some significance in both Bergson's essay on the déjà vu and that concerning the possible. In 'Le Souvenir du present et la fausse reconnaissance', *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Etranger*, December 1908, p. 561, he writes: 'As we witness an event or participate in a conversation, there suddenly arises the conviction that we have already seen what we are seeing, already heard what we are hearing, and already said what is being said . . . in sum, we are reliving down to the last detail an instant of our own past life. The illusion is sometimes so strong that in each moment, as long as this illusion lasts, we believe ourselves to be at the point of predicting what is about to happen: how could we not know already, if we feel that soon *we will know that we knew it*?' [Italics added. This passage does not appear in the existing English translation in *Key Writings*. – TN]

Whatever the temporal location of the experience to which we are referring, the past-form always implies that the actual must step back in favour of the potential. An event that took place many years ago is 'past' in a double sense: something that was perceived and something that was remembered as it took place, a real 'back then' and a virtual 'back then', the chronologically situated past and the past-in-general. An event in the present, as we know, demonstrates its own enduring potential as soon as its image is anachronistically projected back onto the '*passé indéfini*'. An event that takes place subsequently, *will have been possible*: contingency is inherent within future states of affairs (or rather, seems to be one of their salient

'Now, how could we already have lived a part of a situation if we had not lived the whole of it? Could we recognize what is being unrolled if we did not know what is still rolled up? Are we not able at each moment to anticipate at least the following moment? . . . So I am unceasingly, towards what is on the point of happening, in the attitude of a person who will recognize and consequently knows. But this is only the *attitude* of knowledge, the form of it without the matter. As I cannot predict what is going to happen, I quite realize that I do not know it; but I foresee that I am going to have known it, in the sense that I shall recognize it when I shall perceive it; and this recognition to come, which I feel inevitable on account of the rush of my faculty of recognizing, exercises in advance a retroactive effect upon my present, placing me in the strange position of a person who feels he knows what he does not know' ('Memory of the Present and False Recognition', pp. 148–9). Bergson, denying that anything can be possible before it has become real, concludes 'I grant you at most that it *will have been* possible . . . Let a man of talent or genius come forth, let him create a work: it will then be real, and by that very fact it becomes retrospectively or retroactively possible. It would not be possible, it would not have been so, if this man had not come upon the scene. That is why I tell you that it will have been possible today, but that it is not yet so' ('The Possible and the Real', p. 229). I will take the liberty of referring the reader to my own text 'Un dedalo di parole. Per una analisi linguistica della metropoli' (in *La città senza luoghi*, Genoa: Costa & Nolan 1991) with regard to the future perfect *qua* temporal dimension of the modalities of the possible.

traits) precisely and only because they also have a place in the past-in-general, have something of the *previous* about them, and are vested with memory.

In a well-known passage of his *Confessions*, Augustine writes:

> But even now it is manifest and clear that there are neither times future nor times past. Thus it is not properly said that there are three times, past, present, and future. Perhaps it might be said rightly that there are three times: a time present of things past; a time present of things present; and a time present of things future. For these three do coexist somehow in the soul, for otherwise I could not see them. The time present of things past is memory; the time present of things present is direct experience; the time present of things future is expectation.[28]

And yet such a scansion, with its axis in the current present (the object of perception or 'direct intuition'), speaks to the modality of the real, rather than to the modality of the possible. The past – or better, the indeterminate '*de tout temps*' – is pre-eminent with regard to the potentially existing. Paraphrasing Augustine, we ought speak of a *past of the past* (the old 'memory of the present' now placed side-by-side with the perception of the present); of a *past of the present* (as arises in the déjà vu phenomenon); and a *past of the future* (the memory of what is to come, as established by what 'will have been').

28 Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XI, Chapter 20.

5. Language as the Indefinite Past

The past that was never actual, a 'before' with no date, the pure form of the previous: such are the structural characteristics of the time pertaining to possibility. But such a morphological description is only one first step. The past-form is not, indeed, a mental abstraction (possible to grasp by identifying what the countless particular pasts have in common), nor a mere psychological device. Nothing is less 'formalistic' than this form: it does not limit itself to making its mark on many and varied representations, but also exhibits its own particular *mode of existence*. The past-in-general, beyond being a 'how?', is also and above all a 'what?': it refers to an aspect of existence, and is incarnated in an unavoidable concrete process. Our next task, then, consists in understanding *what* the past-in-general *is*, or – the same thing – in naming the potential nestled within it.

The past-in-general is, in the first place, *language*. Meaning: the phonetic, lexical and grammatical system, which exists in the sense of an inexhaustible potential, a potential that is perennial because it is never exhausted or attenuated by the ensemble of its realisations. But the term 'language' here has a more extensive – or less rigorous – meaning than Saussure gives it: it also indicates the general disposition towards articulated discourse, the very fact that *we can* speak. Here we are referring to the language *faculty* as such, not only the system of signs (*langue* in the strict sense, that is) that allows and mediates its exercise.

According to psychiatrists, people subject to déjà vu are, without exception, inclined to find familiar words strange. Their vocabulary is immobilised, stopping the

phrase in its tracks: derailed from its habitual use, it comes into sharp relief, and produces a sort of echo. We are suddenly struck by certain among its material characteristics (the excess of vowels in 'queue', for example), or by the obviousness of its etymology, or by a previously unnoticed homonymy. The familiar word is split in two: we use it to say something, but, at the same time, we put it in inverted commas, as if it were a quotation. It is *used* but also *mentioned*; perceived in its actuality, and together with this remembered as something virtual. On the one hand, the mention of the term – simultaneous to its use – situates what is being said in the past. On the other hand, its mention re-evokes the fact that it belongs to the infinite potential of language, restoring the *dictum* to the terms of the speakable, and referring the act of speaking back to the faculty that made it possible. On the one hand and the other: but is it really the case that two distinct aspects are at play, here? Or are we talking about one and the same thing? On closer inspection, the mention of the familiar word pushes it back into the *passé indéfini* precisely in so far as it reassimilates it to language. And language is, in itself, the purely previous, an indeterminate other-then. The language faculty is the never-present 'back then' to which what I now utter can always look back.

Language is the past-in-general of acts of speaking, the undateable 'before' of every specific, unrepeatable utterance. But what goes for linguistic competence also goes – and to the same extent – for whatever other faculty. The potential of the intellect, the simple *disposition* towards thought, is the *passé indéfini* within which all single intellectual faculties are inscribed. And further: a particular pleasure that I am currently enjoying

nonetheless also exhibits a virtual character, since the memory (of the present) inserts it into the 'already back then' constituted by the *disposition* to enjoy pleasure. However, considering the complexity of our inclinations, it is not difficult to discern a certain asymmetry here. The memory (of the present, which connects the word spoken or the pleasure enjoyed back to their respective conditions of possibility) in turn has its own condition of possibility (its own *passé indéfini*) in the mnestic *faculty*. This latter thus plays a pre-eminent role. Memory is the foundation, or the framework, of the past-in-general that we then in each case identify with various different faculties (language, intellect, etc.). To put it in rather awkward, albeit appropriate jargon: mnestic potential is the One of the Many, the genus of the species. The various faculties (being able to speak, being able to enjoy, etc.) *are* the 'then already' – they exhibit a temporal mode of being, because they are part of the memory-One.

To avoid ambiguity, it is worth specifying once more that the past-in-general is not a determination of time. The experience of any given faculty does not chronologically precede the experience of the performances that realise it; for instance, we do not notice language if not in relation to some concrete utterance (it strikes us as a *de tout temps* or other-then only at the precise instant in which something is uttered). We could say that the past-in-general is a 'before' *contemporaneous to* its 'then'. But we should add: the very fact that these simultaneous elements give themselves to being seen as 'before' and 'after' is the unequivocal sign of the radical difference ('a difference of nature, not degree') between them. Precisely because it exists as a past-in-general (one that has never

been present), the faculty is not comparable, still less reducible, to the concomitant performance.

6. Two Types of Anachronism

Far from Bergson's assertion that 'the memory of the present' coincides with 'false recognition' (he uses the terms as synonyms), they are exact opposites. We have already observed that while the 'memory of the present' allows for the experience of the possible, 'false recognition' instead dissimulates or wipes away this experience. The remembered present is virtual: it is a potential that coexists with the (perceived) act, but is not cancelled out by it. With 'false recognition', conversely, the simultaneous presence of heterogeneous moments (the potential and the act) is camouflaged as the chronologically articulated repetition of a homogeneous *act*: the *possible*-'now' is passed off as a *real*-'back then': the present event seems like the hallucinatory verbatim copy of another event that took place in some previous period.

In both cases, an *anachronism* is at work: both the manifestation and concealment of the virtual make use of a *counter-temporal* process, postulating the transposition of the *hic et nunc* onto the past. And yet here we have two types of anachronism that are not dissimilar, but antithetical: a *formal* (more pretentiously, transcendental) one innervating 'the memory of the present'; and a *real* (but also, factual) opposite one corresponding to 'false recognition'. Here, we can jump forward to the idea that a paralysis of history, as well as the state of mind on which this feeds, traces its origins back to the surreptitious transformation of the formal anachronism into a real anachronism. It traces

its origins, that is, back to the overturning of 'the memory of the present' into a 'false recognition'.

The *formal anachronism* consists of the application of the past-form to the present that is currently underway. But the past-form (or past-in-general) is nothing other than language, a faculty, a disposition. This being so, to apply the past-form to the present means to understand the word being uttered as an index of, or testament to, linguistic competence; to spot in a specific performance the disposition or capacity that allows for it; to push the act taking place back within its correlated *dynamis*; to catch sight of what is loveable in the loved. When the events now being experienced are inserted anachronistically into the faculty – into the '*passé indéfini*' – they are, as well as being real, always also potential. Bergson's thesis that 'a representation can bear the mark of the past independently of what it represents' could be paraphrased as follows: we can grasp an anachronistic 'before' in any given experience, and this 'before' is a disposition (the capacity-to-speak, capacity-to-enjoy, etc.). A representation 'bears the mark of the past' whenever the represented fact lets its own condition of possibility seep through. The formal anachronism allows the present to be considered from the prospective angle of the faculty; but not only the present. The past-in-general – that is, the inexhaustible potential of language or the intellect – equally regards both events that took place long ago (as we already know, in such a case we ought speak of a *past of the past*), and events that are still to come (that is, in the *past of the future*). The temporality of potential – namely, the formal anachronism – intersects the linear, chronological succession of time at every point, complicating and dilating it.

The memory of the present demonstrates both the inextricable mutual belonging of a faculty and a determinate execution of it, *and* the 'difference of nature' that makes it impossible to reduce the one to the other. I say *mutual belonging* because while a memory does, indeed, come into being, it is a memory 'of the present', of the very same present that is simultaneously perceived. Though the *hic et nunc* bifurcates – into language and the word that is spoken, enjoyment and the capacity to enjoy, a specific understanding of something and intellectual potential in general – it is an immediate and single whole. I say *difference* because while what is at question here is, indeed, the present, we also have a 'memory' of it. The disposition's capacity-to-be, appearing as an elusive 'back then', is always distinguished on each occasion from the actually-realised action (even though it has an iron relation of unity with it). But what, ultimately, does the memory of the present reveal, when it exhibits the concomitance – and yet also the difference – between a faculty and its performance? Nothing less than the (not-usually-apparent) genesis of *historical time*; or, if we prefer, the fundamental condition on the basis of which the process of the reproduction of life breaks out of a predetermined and invariant pattern of behaviour.

The difference between the simultaneous potential 'now' and real 'now', the present of the faculty and the present of the performance, is the fulcrum of all truly historical experience. It is its fulcrum, but also its well-spring. Such a difference should be imputed to the very *historicity* of experience. There is history in language *as such*: even though it is only manifested through determinate acts of speaking, it is never exhausted by this or that particular utterance, nor even by an infinite series of

utterances – rather, it exists as a potential that could never be accomplished. There is history in the fact that a determinate piece of work or a determinate understanding of something is inseparable yet also wholly different from the faculty to which it corresponds, labour-power and the intellect respectively. There is history in the fact that the irreversible flow of 'now's incessantly intersects with the perpendicular we call the past-in-general: the single 'now', preceded and followed by other specific 'now's, itself harbours the temporal (but *not* chronological) relation between the 'before' of a disposition (the *past of the present*) and the 'after' of its realisation.

There would be no history, then, if the instant that I am living through were only perceived, rather than also being remembered as I experience it; if the 'totality of what we are seeing, hearing and experiencing' were not at each moment split into 'actual and virtual, perception on the one side and memory on the other'. The formal anachronism, whose prerogative is to display both the intertwining and the hiatus between the possible and the real, is neither anti-historical nor supra-historical, but, so to speak, *historicising*. The difficulties and the dilemmas that this sometimes raises do not in fact depend on any apparent suspension of the genesis of history, but rather – quite the contrary – on the direct, almost empirical and yet dazzling demonstration of what it is that makes this genesis historical.

The *real anachronism* distorts, inverts and dissembles the processes and results of the formal anachronism. It is a reaction to the formal anachronism, a backlash against or antidote to it, or perhaps an escape-tunnel from it. What is really the splitting of one same *hic et nunc* into act and potential is transfigured, through a

diachronic relation, into two identical acts, into two separate *hic et nunc*s characterised by the same perceptual content. In the real anachronism, the past-*form* – which confers a virtual character on the present – is systematically reduced to a past *fact*, and the present provides a coterminous copy of it. But what does such a reduction entail?

We know that the past-form (or past-in-general) is language, disposition, the condition of possibility. As such, to confuse the past-*form* for a past *fact* means to conceive the language faculty – the mere capacity-to-speak – as *the already-spoken word*, the mass of actually-performed utterances. The faculty is equated to a single performance, or better, to the previous performance which appears as the prototype of the one now being performed. The condition of possibility of an event is represented as another event, its outdated original version. The disposition towards pleasure is totally identified with the pleasures already enjoyed, the intellect coincides with a series of particular understandings, labour-power becomes indistinguishable from labour that has been carried out, and only the already-loved is loveable. The real anachronism denies the *simultaneity* of potential and act, disposition and performance, past-in-general and instantaneous present; but, for precisely this reason, it also denies their essential *difference*. Language, equated to an utterance that has already been uttered, can no longer be said to be simultaneous to the utterance that is being uttered now. Besides, and for the same reason – because it is assimilated to a (past) act of speaking – language appears coextensive or indeed entirely homogeneous with the act of speaking realised in a certain present moment. As such, it is impossible to see difference

between the two accomplished facts, between the two performances. If there is a difference, it is one of degree, *not* nature.[29]

'False recognition' closes the hiatus between potential and act, a hiatus fully brought into focus by the memory of the present. It identifies a faculty with the sum of its objectifications. It reabsorbs the past-in-general back into the chronological sequence of time. But the enduring discrepancy between potential and act, language and the word spoken, labour-power and a specific labour (a discrepancy which strikes us in conjunction with their simultaneity and mutual belonging) is the matrix of historical time. As such, 'false recognition' masks the historicity of experience. The real anachronism *dehistoricises*. That is to say, it induces the state of mind based on which people are led to conclude that history is now exhausted, that 'there is never anything new . . . each moment [is] a repetition of the past'.

If everything has happened already, nothing is worth the trouble. Every action is just a copy, or, better, a *quotation* taken from a script that we cannot question. But what is it, concretely, that prescribes our script? What are these acts that we are always on the point of

29 The *real* anachronism turning the *formal* anachronism on its head perhaps in some senses resembles the rather insidious type of misunderstandings which Kant calls 'paralogisms of pure reason'. The paralogism consists in taking an *a priori* category (the category of substance, for instance) for a known content (thus affirming that the pure Id on which all categories depend, including that of substance, is itself . . . a substance). Thus we exchange the thing that allows for experience – for phenomena to happen and be represented – for a determination of the phenomena experienced. In the same sense, in our example, the real anachronism equates the past-form to a past-fact, language into an already-uttered utterance, and so on. We could thus say that the real anachronism is the *paralogism of memory* (and of historical reason).

repeating? How is the imperious past, to which we epigones must conform, articulated? There can be no answer to such questions. The gestures that we carry out are, indeed, imitations, but we would never be able to point to the original by which they are inspired. The identical type is ever-returning yet remains unknown to us. We are compelled to reproduce something, but it is something undefined, an I-don't-know-what whose content we can only ascertain after having reproduced it. But how come we get the impression that we are subject to a nameless coercion by its elusive physiognomy? Its origin is to be found in none other than the present, its double character, its splitting into a potential 'now' and an actual 'now'.

'False recognition' is, in a word, *false*. Everyday experience seems to reiterate a past, already-lived experience with philological scruple. It only *seems* to do so, however: the previous event, despite having risen to the rank of an archetype, has in fact never taken place. Rather, it is the potential inherent within this *hic et nunc* that is taking on the appearance of an earlier act, the act that seems despotically to demand its own repetition. And this is the reason why we can never specify what the ever-returning identical type is. The *possible* contained within the present lords it over us like a peremptory fate or obscure precedent. History is stopped in its tracks, as our faculties are reduced to a script to which we must conform down to the last detail – a jumble of performances that must be reiterated *ad infinitum*. We become epigones or spectators, but *epigones or spectators of our very own potential-to-be*.

7. The Snobbery of Memory

This reflection on the two different forms of anachronism now allows us to formulate a detailed and sharp-pointed thesis that will not be blunted by too many nuances. More than a thesis, it is a guide-to-thought with which we can mount an offensive against certain theories and emotional inclinations that postulate the completion or collapse of the process of history.

The feeling of déjà vu, awakened by 'false recognition', leads us to believe that even if we are faced with continuous change, everything is the same, everything is repeating itself. It goes without saying, however, that there would be no 'false recognition' if it were not for 'the memory of the present'. Only where the virtual is in full flower right next to the actual could we ever illusorily confuse it for something that we have experienced already. The real anachronism makes use of materials that the formal anachronism puts at its disposal: and nothing else beyond them. As such, it uses its opposite as its own lever. But since 'false recognition' conceals the genesis of historical time, the genesis that the 'memory of the present', conversely, reveals and displays, to state that the former presupposes the latter has a consequence of some significance (here accorded the value of a 'thesis'). Namely: *the 'end of history' is an idea, or state of mind, that arises precisely when the very condition of possibility of history comes into view*; when the root of all historical activity is cast out onto the surface of historical becoming, and is evident as a phenomenon; when the *historicity* of experience is itself also manifested *historically*.

The best way to examine this guide-to-thought more closely is to put it to the test. That is, we ought to test the

waters of its explanatory capacity and critical force in relation to an example text. In a long footnote to his *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, Alexandre Kojève maintains that the exhaustion of history diagnosed by Hegel is no longer, in our epoch, some future eventuality, but rather is a *fait accompli*.[30] The industrial societies of the post-Second World War period, in this view, had now left behind the struggle against nature and the struggle for mutual recognition. Labour – that is, the opposition between Subject and Object – was losing weight and significance as automated production processes captured and subjugated nature in such measure as to allow for a stable relation with it. Similarly, politics – the search for the recognition of others by way of wars and revolutions – was also declining. The bloody conflicts of the last century represented only a 'spatial extension' of the essential results achieved once and for all time by Robespierre and Napoleon. Also disappearing together with Labour and Politics is 'Action in the strong sense of the term', which, rejecting 'the given', was always seeking to establish a historically new world. But what forms of life prevail in post-historical societies? Kojève saw two of them, a pair that diverged and were even opposites.

On the one hand, the post-history in which we are supposedly immersed is explained as man 'becoming an animal again'. Rather than inhabiting a *world* with struggle and labour, the living being of the *Homo sapiens* species is now encapsulated in an *environment*, to which it adapts without any kind of friction. Certainly, even

30 Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1980. In the text I focus exclusively on the long note in which he develops the discussion from the twelfth of his 1938–9 lectures at the École pratique des hautes études.

after the conclusion of the business of History, we will build houses and create works of art, but following the same impulse that leads a bird to make its nest or a spider to spin its web. Nothing like happiness is any longer in question: rather, 'men will surely be *content* as a result of their *artistic*, *erotic* and playful behavior inasmuch as, by definition, they will be contented with it'. Also accounted for here is the 'definitive disappearance of human discourse (*Logos*) in the strict sense'. In its place, 'vocal signals or sign "language"' will proliferate, to which we would react by conditioned reflex: nothing much different from 'what is supposed to be the "language" of bees'. In Kojève's view, the *American way of life*, in which the eternal present typical of an 'environment' dominates, exemplifies well the condition of post-historical animals.

Another way of being also comes into view at the end of history, diametrically opposed to the one just sketched out. It is a matter of *snobbery*. That is to say, an affected attitude that shrinks from any utilitarian automatism and clashes with the '"animal" or "natural" given'. Though having nothing to do with Labour or 'warlike and revolutionary Fights', the snob nonetheless maintains a separation between the *forms* and *contents* of his own activity, such as to guarantee the former a marked independence from (and supremacy over) the latter. The unequalled model of this way of being is Japanese culture: there, indeed, Noh theatre, the tea ceremony, and the art of flower arranging, have built up a widespread propensity to 'live according to totally formalized values'. No longer historical yet still human (the fracture between Subject and Object having been reinvented), Japanese snobbery, according to Kojève, alludes to a principle-hope of general applicability: 'While henceforth speaking

in an *adequate* fashion of everything that is given to him, post-historical Man must continue to *detach* "form" from "content", doing so no longer in order actively to transform the latter, but so that he may *oppose* himself as a pure "form" to himself and to others taken as "content" of any sort.'

Becoming an animal again, or else snobbery. The alternative proposed by Kojève is in many aspects akin to that with which we dealt in the previous few pages: real anachronism or formal anachronism, false recognition or memory of the present. However, in order to make clear this consonance, we must call into question the conceptual schema within which Kojève inscribes his pair of opposed choices. And it attracts two principal objections.

First off, far from it playing a protagonist's role on the little stage of post-history, we could even say that snobbery constitutes the very quintessence of historical life. Its prerogative is to show the autonomy and exuberance of 'forms' with respect to 'contents': but what are this autonomy and exuberance, other than the *prerequisite* of Labour and Politics: in other words, 'Action in the strong sense of the term'? Snobbery unveils the foundation of historical conflicts, since it devotes itself to representing, through a series of determinate acts, the contrast that generally exists between human action and 'the given'. Detaching 'forms' from 'contents', snobbery *factually* expresses the impossibility of any *fact* entirely realising the corresponding capacity-to-do. To put it another way: snobbery is a peculiar praxis that reflects in itself – and relentlessly exhibits – the historicity of every type of praxis (including 'snobbish' praxis as well, of course). To attribute a post-historical character to the snob is a classic case of being blinded by too much light.

Secondly, 'becoming an animal again' is not a biological fate, corresponding to the disappearance of any friction with nature. On the contrary, it is an existential possibility that reveals itself in so far as the gap with 'the given' is exaggeratedly accentuated, becomes most visible, and is experienced *as such*. But this accentuation, as well as the visibility and direct experience of the gap with 'the given', is the result of snobbery. As such, we must say that 'becoming an animal again' is the existential possibility that reveals itself on the basis of the full affirmation of the snobbish lifestyle. For Kojève, the post-historical animal always adheres symbiotically to the 'contents' of its action, while the snob distances himself from them, counterposing to this the autonomy of 'forms'. But he is mistaken here. Such a symbiotic adherence would only be conceivable, in truth, if we supposed that *Homo sapiens* somersaulted into the immutable condition of the wolf or the ape; but if we did suppose such a somersault, the self-distancing subsequently operated by the snob would itself be inconceivable. On closer inspection, the fracture between the 'forms' and 'contents' of activity is at the basis of *both* modes of being. The division that separates and renders them antithetical is, rather, the following: the snob tries to live at the level of this fracture, understanding that the source of history is to be found within it; the post-historical animal, conversely, makes the overpopulation of forms into an *environment* at one remove, viscous and all-embracing, and *adapts* to its prescriptions in virtue of some (pseudo-)instinctive behaviour. To use Kojève's example: the post-historical animal is he who reduces the most elaborate, affected aspects of the tea ceremony to an immediate 'given'. Precisely because they are detached from their natural 'contents', and precisely

because of their independence (and hypertrophy), 'forms' are surreptitiously taken for a catalogue of minute 'contents' – and with this, their frictionless mutual penetration does indeed seem possible.

The post-historical animal and the snob do not limit themselves to coexisting spatially, each of them extraneous and refractory with regard to the other. Within the latter we can still make out the silhouette of the former, even if it has been disfigured and upended. The intimate relationship between these two contenders does not, however, blunt the contest itself. The antithesis between these two forms of life is all the more radical, indeed, the more they are based on identical premises and defined against the same background. This background is not, as Kojève supposes, the 'end of history'. On the contrary, the opposition between 'becoming an animal again' and snobbery is resolved on the stage of a *hyper-historical* epoch: the epoch in which, let us repeat, not only do we experience historical events, but we face up to the very thing that confers a historical tone on every event.

The memory of the present is a very snobbish thing indeed. And the converse is also true: snobbery is, in its essentials, the memory of the present. By applying the past-in-general to a current event, we subvert the '"natural" or "animal" given', thus interrupting the automatism of the action that is underway. The formal anachronism is constantly *removing the environment* anew. The snobbery of memory splits the univocal *hic et nunc* into two heterogeneous sides. It sets a potential (remembered) present alongside the real (perceived) present: but, even while placing them together, it simultaneously underlines their incommensurability and the discrepancy between them. It is eminently snobbish to re-evoke the virtual

nature of language at the very moment in which a particular utterance is being uttered: and it is thus, indeed, that the 'difference of nature' between capacity-to-speak (faculty) and the word spoken (performance) becomes manifest. This difference is the marker of 'human discourse (*Logos*) in the strict sense'. And this is confirmed in the perspicacious whispers of those who, finding a familiar word strange, place it in inverted commas (thus citing or *remembering* it) already as it is being employed in its instrumental guise.

False recognition suits 'becoming an animal again' very well. And the converse is also true: 'becoming an animal again' announces itself first and foremost as false recognition. When today's potential is confused for an already-experienced act, which we are now constrained to copy unvaryingly, human praxis degenerates into repetitive, predetermined behaviour patterns. To identify the faculty (capacity-to-do) with a list of specific performances (*faits accomplis*) carves out an environment for us within which any freedom from 'the given' is imperceptible. It is clear, however, that this confusion and this identification would be impossible if the potential and the faculty had not acquired an autonomous significance thanks to the snobbish memory of the present. When we experience language through the prism of each concrete utterance, communication resembles a weft of 'vocal signals or sign "language"', but, in experiencing it, we take it for an immense reservoir of *already*-spoken words, to be repeated and repeated again in correspondence with environmental stimuli. The impulse for happiness declines, and people are simply content (inasmuch as they are *contented* with their own behaviour), when the disposition to enjoy pleasure appears as such – as distinct from

a single actual pleasure – but, at the same time, it is equated (through 'false recognition', indeed) with the sum of *already*-enjoyed pleasures.

8. On the Utility and Liability of Memory for History

The thesis gathered from our analysis of the déjà vu told us that the 'end of history' is a state of mind that takes root precisely where the very historicity of experience has come into relief, precisely where even the genesis of historical time is in question. The apparent collapse *discloses* (carefully conceals yet also unwillingly signals) a real tuning fork. This thesis exclusively regards concepts that concern the functioning of memory: the memory of the present, anachronism, etc. Up to this point, however, it has been used to interpret and criticise Kojève's representation of the 'end of history', which does not in fact mention the role of memory, but rather interpellates phenomena of quite a different kind. Namely, the decline of Labour and Politics, the animalistic nature of the American way of life, and Japanese snobbery. We now need, then, to take a further step.

This thesis should be confronted with a text that *directly* imputes the breakdown of historical praxis to the mnestic faculty. We must say immediately that such a comparison demands a partial change of perspective. The thesis here takes on a self-reflective tenor: the functioning of memory appears simultaneously as the *explicans* and the *explicandum*, a deep-seated model and a phenomenon at surface-level, a central thread and a maze, the pivot of the solution and the cause of the problem. Here, our task is no longer to outline analogies or spot

similarities between the existential experience of memory and the contemporary public mood, but rather to understand how (and with what consequences) this experience has itself acquired immediate public importance. Rather than limit ourselves to deciphering certain forms of life by bringing in the outside aid of mnestic processes, it is necessary also to interrogate the forms of life that these processes themselves foment.

In the second of his *Untimely Meditations*, entitled 'On the utility and liability of history for life', Nietzsche maintains that an over-abundance of memory paralyses action, cuts off the future, and encourages melancholy: 'Imagine the most extreme example, a human being who does not possess the power to forget, who is damned to see becoming everywhere; such a human being . . . would hardly even dare to lift a finger. All action requires forgetting, just as the existence of all organic things requires not only light, but darkness as well.'[31] The mounting mass of memories implies an enormous growth in historical consciousness and historiographical knowledge. But untrammelled dedication to the past, instilling the belief that we are its late-flowering fruits and its epigones, ultimately undermines history itself: 'at the point of a certain excess of history, life crumbles and degenerates – as does, ultimately, as a result of this degeneration, history itself, as well'.[32]

History gets worn out and stumbles precisely *because* memory becomes hypertrophic. While 'historical human beings' are able to 'utilize the past for life',[33] placing it at

31 Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large, eds., *The Nietzsche Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, p. 127.

32 Ibid., p. 131.

33 Ibid., p. 128.

the service of an action that looks to the future, 'passive' and 'backward-looking' individuals of modern times allow themselves to be hypnotised by memories, cultivating them as a good in themselves, no longer being able to select among them in view of some new endeavour. Or so Nietzsche says. Now, however, we must ask ourselves: in what kind of predicament does memory achieve a troubling autonomy from the tasks of life, expanding beyond measure? In one case, above all: when it takes the present as its own object, treating it as something that has already been – that is, when we have the feeling of déjà vu. According to Bergson, if in general 'consciousness, attentive to life, only admits, legally, those [memories] which can offer their guidance to action',[34] in the event of déjà vu we mainly remember the superfluous, namely the very thing that we are perceiving in the current moment: 'what can be more unavailing of our present action than the memory of the present?'[35] Unavailing, but also harmful. Employing expressions almost identical to those that Nietzsche uses to point to the difficulties caused by an exorbitant feeling for history, Bergson correlates the mnestic pathology to 'a weakening or impairing of our attention to outward life', the 'feeling that the future is closed', a 'state of apathy and inertia'.

The hypertrophy of memory, from which the consumption and blockage of history derive, is made up of déjà vu. People for whom the present seems wholly dependent on the past, like an echo of the original sound, are no longer historical (they are now incapable, that is, of carrying out

34 Bergson, 'Memory of the Present and False Recognition', p. 152.

35 Ibid., p. 153.

genuinely historical actions). But no *authentic* past is of such considerable authority as to impose such a dependency. No sequence of events that has really happened deserves to be emblazoned with the title of an untouchable, binding archetype. Rather, the past that subjects those afflicted by hypermnesia to itself is a *pseudo*-past. Only a fictitious 'once upon a time' could demand that it be reproduced in every detail by the current *hic et nunc*. To put it better: in the experience of déjà vu, it is only the fantastical 'once upon a time' that holds stage. Those who are sheepishly obsequious to what has been, are in effect obsequious to 'now' itself, projected back in time. And in so far as we have a memory of this 'now' already as we experience it, it constitutes an illusory and yet overbearing 'back then' (indeed, it is overbearing because it is illusory), faced with which we must inevitably behave mimetically. In the epoch in which the *perceived* present seems to have to retrace the *remembered* present, with the scruple of the epigone and the destructive melancholy of the late-flowering fruit, people indulge in a resignation-streaked fatalism.

The déjà vu phenomenon establishes a bridge between the second of the *Untimely Meditations* and what Nietzsche called the 'thought of thoughts': the eternal return of the identical type. The weakening of life's (and history's) potential, attributed in his 1874 text to a vertiginous increase in memory-activity, is expressed most vividly in the refrain with which he subsequently proclaimed nihilism (in a passage of *Zarathustra*): 'All is empty, all is alike, all hath been!'[36] If all has been, every

36 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, New York: Random House 1917, II, 41.

event today repeats a previous event and is in turn destined to be infinitely repeated. A chilling perspective: we cannot do anything but grit our teeth at the thought of a life where 'there will be nothing new in it'.[37] Far from alleviating the weight of nihilism, the idea of an eternal return brings it to fever pitch. It gives a cosmological value ('time itself is a circle')[38] to the typical illusion of déjà vu. But such a formulation of the doctrine is too-readily awestruck: in a sense it is gloomy and nightmarish, yet it is also superficial, an 'organ grinder's song' making things simple for itself.

The thought of an eternal return is counterposed to nihilism, first and foremost to the nihilist version of the eternal return (already presaged in some pages of the second of the *Untimely Meditations*). The pernicious spell that compels us to consider an action in the making as the duplication of some prior action is thwarted if only we ask ourselves what the model-action really is. We have just observed how, when we fall mercy to déjà vu, we seem to be repeating something, but we cannot say *what it is* that we are repeating: the specific content of the repetition is established only by the actual experience,

37 Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, New York: Dover Publications 2006, §341. 'What if a demon crept after thee into thy loneliest loneliness some day or night, and said to thee: "This life, as thou livest it at present, and hast lived it, thou must live it once more, and also innumerable times; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and every sigh, and all the unspeakably small and great in thy life must come to thee again, and all in the same series and sequence – and similarly this spider and this moonlight among the trees, and similarly this moment, and I myself. The eternal sand-glass of existence will ever be turned once more, and thou with it, thou speck of dust!" – Wouldst thou not throw thyself down and gnash thy teeth, and curse the demon that so spake?'

38 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, III, 46.

and it is up to the 'now' to determine the 'already-been' retroactively. And yet, as soon as it usurps the paradoxical structure of déjà vu, rather than indulging the illusory and paralysing effects that it produces, the doctrine of the eternal return serves as an antidote to nihilism. If the gesture that I now perform necessarily had to conform even in the slightest detail to some particular gesture performed in the past, it would not even be worth lifting a finger. But this is not the case. According to Nietzsche, only the present moment can decide what has already been; the action now underway has the task of establishing the *quid* that it is called upon to reiterate; it is the *hic et nunc*'s prerogative to create the event that it is bringing back. Heidegger recapitulated this decisive aspect of Nietzsche's 'thought of thoughts' with words that could fully figure in any sober account of the déjà vu:

> Whatever is or is to be will be decided in and by Dasein, inasmuch as only those aspects of Becoming that were once a part of my life are destined to come again. But then do we know what once was? No! Can we ever know such things? We know nothing of an earlier life. Everything we are now living we experience for the first time, although now and again in the midst of our ordinary experiences that strange and obscure experience crops up which says: What you are now experiencing, precisely in the form it is now taking, you have experienced once before . . . what will come again when it recurs? The answer to that question is: whatever will be in the next moment.[39]

39 Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 1, New York: Harper Collins 1991, p. 136.

Let us pick up the main thread of our discourse again. History stops because memory becomes hypertrophic; the hypertrophy of memory, which prevents history from acting, consists of déjà vu. The questions raised by the second of the *Untimely Meditations* (excess of memory, excess of history) were expounded again in close connection with the contemporary situation. One question in particular seems unavoidable: how has the déjà vu attained the rank of a collective phenomenon, such that the customs and mentality of the so-called 'post-modern' epoch bear its imprint? Why has it been transformed from a private, exceptional episode into such a manifest, widespread circumstance? Or, if you prefer: for what reason has the déjà vu taken on a *historical* significance, and, indeed, how come we can point to the déjà vu as the historical fact in which the idea of an 'end of history' is rooted (and which validates this idea)? In answering this, we need once again to pay the greatest attention to what we grasped at the very outset: the coexistence within the déjà vu of two aspects that are not only distinct, but moreover contradictory.

9. The Modernariat

The excess of memory, which without doubt characterises the contemporary situation, has a name: *the memory of the present*. This latter, rather than remaining a fundamental and yet hidden characteristic of the mnestic faculty, breaks through to the surface and is explicitly manifest. What is excessive is not *per se* the split in every instant between a perceived 'now' and a remembered 'now', but rather the fact that this split has become fully

visible. To what do we owe such a radical disclosure? Perhaps to a pathological 'lack of attention to life', as Bergson claims? Nothing of the kind. The memory of the present, whose peculiar function is precisely to represent the possible, presents itself unreservedly when the experience of the possible assumes a crucial importance in the fulfilment of life's tasks. It is the objective pre-eminence of the virtual in any given type of praxis that brings the mnestic mechanism openly into relief – in determining the temporality of the virtual, this mechanism opens the way to the virtual itself. The excess of memory *does not* induce lethargy and resignation, but on the contrary guarantees the most intense alacrity.

The paralysis of action, often accompanied by an ironic disillusionment, derives above all from the inability to bear the experience of the possible. To put it another way, the effective cause of this paralysis is the overturning of the memory of the present in *false recognition*, which, as we know, reconfigures today's possible as a previously-existing real that we must now inevitably reiterate. Since the memory of the present is an explicit, pervasive phenomenon, even its direct negation – that is, false recognition – is immediately in evidence. Déjà vu is, indeed, a pathology: but, we must add, it is a *public* pathology.

In the contemporary situation, apparently in harmony with the plot of the second of Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*, the over-abundance of memory entails an over-abundance of history. This does not, however, mean the maniacal (and asphyxiating) predominance of historiographical studies. The problem is something rather more extreme: the unprecedented proximity of every particular instance of action and suffering to history's

conditions of possibility, namely what *historicises* action and suffering *per se*.

Let us retrace in shorthand a reasoning that we have already worked through in some detail. The memory of the present produces an anachronism. But, mind, only a *formal* anachronism: it gives the present the *form* of the 'back then'. Remembering an action as I am carrying it out, I situate it in an undefined past without any date, a past that has never been present. This non-chronological 'before' is the faculty, or disposition, on which the execution of this action depends. Because of the formal anachronism, within the event now underway I can simultaneously glimpse both the act and the potential: the language and the word that is uttered, a particular pleasure and the disposition to enjoy pleasure. All the same, when we consider both the specific performance and the faculty that allows for it, we also note their indelible *difference*: language is never realised by the sum of words spoken (in other words, it is never actual); labour-power cannot be equated to the sum of completed labours. And yet, the permanent difference between capacity-to-do and *faits accomplis* provides the very foundation of the historicity of experience. The formal anachronism is a representation of this foundation.

But what matters more: in our epoch, the root of acting historically (the coexistence of, as well as the discrepancy between, potential and act) has acquired empirical and even pragmatic significance as a phenomenon. There is no work task today that does not require – if it is to be discharged in full – the exhibition of the generic psychophysical disposition to produce (namely, labour-power), which goes beyond the task itself. Nor is there any effective, pertinent discourse today that, beyond communicating

something, does not also have to demonstrate the speaker's linguistic competence pure and simple, namely the capacity-to-speak (language), which always exceeds the content that the communication happens to have. The formal anachronism thus also itself becomes a *public* mechanism, an inevitable requisite of production and discourse. The over-abundance of history (connected to the over-abundance of memory) points us to where human praxis is directly grappling with the difference between faculty and performance, which constitutes history's condition of possibility.

Nietzsche held that 'at the point of a certain excess of history, life crumbles and degenerates – as does, ultimately, as a result of this degeneration, history itself, as well'. We can here put our own name to this statement, on condition that the original meaning is altered. The idea of an 'end of history' is *not* the consequence of excess, as Nietzsche hypothesises, *but* rather the consequence of its obfuscation. It is also true, moreover, that this obfuscation presupposes a revelation: it concerns something (namely, the over-abundance of history) on which our gaze is now fixed. Let us consider these two aspects more closely. The post-historical state of mind is awakened by the overturning of the (historicising) formal anachronism in the *real anachronism*, which is symmetrically opposed to it. The real anachronism conceals the difference between potential and act (the foundation of historicity), thus reducing potential to a previous act, a faculty to past performances, and language to already-spoken words. Nonetheless, the radical difference between capacity-to-do and *faits accomplis* is subject to a transfiguration – one that conceals this difference – precisely and only when it comes to the fore, when it is

empirically most dazzling. The real anachronism is based on the formal anachronism, attesting to its opposite as it clashes with and deforms it. The impression that the historical process is stuck ('history itself . . . crumbles and degenerates') does indeed arise when human praxis stands closest to history's condition of possibility ('a certain excess of history'), but it arises as a reaction that detracts from it, or what Dante called a *contrapasso*.

Here, we get to something else that perhaps ought to be counted among the many ways in which we can formulate the salient problem of the contemporary situation. Namely, learning to experience the memory of the present (or better, its explicit, pervasive character) as such, thus liberating it from the nemesis that degrades it into false recognition. Learning to experience the memory of the present means to attain the possibility of a *fully historical existence*. Such a possibility, if it is not incarnated in a set of habits – that is, in an ethos – will not remain neglected, ever-flickering on the horizon, but rather penetrates into its opposite, taking on the semblance of the 'end of history'. And that is what is happening today, in the main. Faced with the hyper-historicity of experience, postmodern ideology hurries to play the broken record of the déjà vu, simultaneously both sweet and gloomy. Everything has already been; history has fallen 'into the order of the recyclable'; we are destined, for better or for worse, to 'the massive recall, at every moment, of all the patterns of our life';[40] every action has the status and the mannerisms of a quotation.

Making its mark on the contemporary public spirit, the déjà vu (or false recognition, or real anachronism)

40 Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, pp. 27, 73.

determines collective behaviours, lifestyles and emotional propensities. To illustrate these behaviours, lifestyles and propensities in a synthetic (yet not elusive) manner, it is opportune again to turn to the second of Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*. We know already that the déjà vu subjects us to a *pseudo*-past, the fictitious 'back then' that the present seems compelled zealously to reproduce. But every relationship with the past, even when it is utterly illusory, requires the development of a certain *historiographical talent*. Obviously what is in question here is not a scientific methodology, but an undertone of common sense, the non-premeditated inclination to take care of what has been. The question that makes us again turn to Nietzsche's text is more or less the following: what kind of 'historiography' appertains to the false past set up by déjà vu? What type of historical narration establishes itself at the 'end of history'?

Nietzsche discerned three possible approaches to the cadaster of *res gestae*. He termed *monumental* that history (read: historiography) which strives to present models worthy of emulation: 'a collection of "effects in themselves" of events that will have an effect in every age'.[41] *Critical* history is that concerned with 'passing judgment on and destroying the past': it is cultivated by those of us who, unable to bear the miserable present, attempt 'to give ourselves *a posteriori*, as it were, a new past from which we would prefer to be descended, as opposed to that past from which we actually descended'.[42] Finally (though taking the middle place in Nietzsche's ordering), there is *antiquarian* history, which 'preserves

41 *Nietzsche Reader*, pp. 133–4.
42 Ibid, p. 138.

and venerates' the past, as it really was, in its totality, without missing out the slightest detail.[43] For the antiquarian historian, *everything* deserves to be kept alive in memory: the village fête, an incidental comment that just slipped out, the humble 'almost vanishing traces' of history. Monumental historiography can degenerate into overblown rhetoric, and the critical approach into peevish rancour: however, since each of them maintains a certain link with activity and the unfolding of history, their over-abundance is harmful to life to only a limited degree. Only the excess of antiquarian history causes irreparable damage. Its stunning suggestion that we ought to remember every particular raises the spectre of hypermnesia, which Nietzsche discusses right at the beginning of this text: 'Imagine the most extreme example, a human being who does not possess the power to forget.'[44] This extreme case, at first brought up as a bogeyman, becomes a *routine* when antiquarian history has its way. It flourishes untroubled even 'when history itself is lost' – even and *especially* then.

The pseudo-past, when we are being led on by the déjà vu, does not allow for filters or choices. Rather, it appears to be 'preserving and venerating' everything, almost as if it were a vivid *hic et nunc*. Antiquarian historiography lovingly tends to the 'once upon a time' evoked by false recognition. But, we should repeat, here 'historiography' must not be taken to mean a specialist knowledge, but rather a widespread and even banalised existential attitude. Correlating extremely closely to the post-historical mood, the antiquarian attitude is an indelible component

43 Ibid., p. 135.
44 Ibid., p. 127.

of the forms of life characterised by the déjà vu as public pathology. But of what, exactly, does this attitude consist?

The 'past' to be preserved and venerated (and this veneration's only requite is in mimesis) is nothing other than the present: or better, the present smuggled in place of something that already happened, through a real anachronism. Antiquarian historiography applies its own typical methods to actuality: everything that happens is treated as suggestive *evidence*, while it is still happening; the current moment is consumed by *nostalgia*. But the antiquarian inclination ought to have a more specific name for when it is concentrated on the present: *modernariat*. In its common usage, this term designates the – sentimental, aesthetic, commercial – interest in objects and artefacts belonging to the recent past (so recent, it skirts on today): the music of the 1960s, the political posters of the following decade, and then, continuing onward, the washing machine that just gave up the ghost, or last summer's fashionable hats. In the radical usage that we here propose, 'modernariat' instead means the systematic development of an antiquarian sensibility with regard to the *hic et nunc* being lived at any given moment. In one sense, the modernariat is a symptom of the doubling of the present as an illusory 'already-been'; but it also actively contributes to the ever-renewed realisation of this double.

The modernariat is the historiographical genre that prevails when History always seems to be setting the pace; when, that is, it seems – as Bergson wrote of the déjà vu – 'that *the future is closed*, that the situation is detached from everything although I am attached to it'.[45]

45 Bergson, 'Memory of the Present and False Recognition', p. 155.

The antiquarian history of the present gives rise to what Nietzsche called 'a blind mania to collect'.[46] The modernariat develops a sort of cult of whatever happens to exist *now*: it surveys it with 'insatiable curiosity' and attributes it the stunning fascination and prestige of destiny. Walter Benjamin tried to put some of the prerogatives of the 'antiquarian' approach to the service of 'critical' history, or to make the antiquariat supremely critical: as such, he sang the praises of the collector (think of his 'Edward Fuchs, Collector and Historian'[47]) and his vocation of redeeming the 'oppressed past' sabotaged by the victors of history, with special concern for the lowly, the hidden and the silenced. Benjamin's proposal is, today, being hideously caricatured by part of the modernariat, who favour a particular form of collecting: not to bring out in the present the plot of a thorny past which has been misunderstood (i.e., Benjamin's intention), but rather to give the present the stigmata of a sacred and unmodifiable past. Not satisfied with contemplating the 'now' as if it were a 'back then', the post-historical collector also nurtures a certain admiration for it, to the extent of concluding that 'it's too late to do anything better'.

The antiquarian history of the present, or modernariat, is wholly at one with the *society of the spectacle*. In turn, we could say that the society of the spectacle is the modernariat raised to the *n*th degree. The 'blind mania to collect' of our time understands the present day as a sort of 'world's fair'. An exhibition, that is, where the same individual attends both as an actor ('playing a role – for most people, many roles, thus playing them all superficially and badly')

46 *Nietzsche Reader*, p. 137.

47 Translation in *New German Critique*, no. 5 (1975), pp. 27–58.

and as a spectator 'wandering in search of pleasure'. That is, they are their own spectators; or rather, though it is the same thing, they *collect their own life* while it is passing, rather than living it. Why is the present incessantly duplicated as the spectacle of the present? Why does it take on the aspect of a 'world's fair'?

Such questions have become rhetorical, by now. The present is duplicated because of the déjà vu. When we feel that we are simultaneously both acting in and spectating on our lives, this is a case of false recognition. It is then, according to Bergson, that a person 'is looking on at his own movements, thoughts and actions', such as to split him into two people, as if one were 'an actor playing a part' for the other, spectating.[48] Far from only referring to the growing consumption of cultural commodities, the notion of the spectacle concerns, first and foremost, the post-historical inclination towards *watching oneself live*. To put it another way: the spectacle is the form that the déjà vu takes, as soon as this becomes an exterior, public form beyond one's own person. The society of the spectacle offers people the 'world's fair' of their own capacity to do, to speak and to be – but reduced to already-performed actions, already-spoken phrases and already-complete events.

48 Bergson, 'Memory of the Present and False Recognition', p. 150.

Part II

Temporality of Potential, Potentiality of Time

We are unable . . . in general, to think the stationary in time, the coexistence of which with the variable, produces the conception of change.

Immanuel Kant

Premise

In the first part of the book, we tried to get a clear view of the genesis and significance of the terribly contemporary idea of the 'end of History'. In order to do so, we had to define – approximately, of course, though not only in the vaguest terms – what it was that here supposedly met its end. We can only explain the 'end of History', this spirit so characteristic of our epoch (thus in itself providing a historical index), through a fundamental investigation of the very concept of *historicity*. That is, we can only explain the 'end of History' if we devote ourselves to naming the fundamental conditions that give a 'historical' character to so-called 'historical events', and, indeed, all the aspects – even the least evident ones – of experience. To call into question the concept of historicity entails – has entailed – a considerable expansion of our research horizons. Indeed, how can we give account of historical time, of its peculiar status, emergence and eventual decline, without encroaching on at least some of the prominent hypotheses on the structure of temporality in general?

It is possible that a certain number of readers will not have noticed the gradual widening of our field of enquiry. Or worse, that they have suffered it impatiently, considering it an error that has spoiled and dulled an otherwise lively and stimulating discussion. If they are kind-spirited, they will have considered the analysis of the déjà vu an amusing aside or impressionistic sketch. Patience, now: there is never any lack of those who look but do not see. But of course, the following pages are not addressed to

this type of reader. The rest of the book is directed, rather, towards those who have well understood what is at stake here, and are determined not to allow the author to get away with a cut-price response. To those people, that is, who would far prefer an out-in-the-open failure to the art of using a few savvy allusions in order to give off the impression of confidence. To those, that is, who are demanding that I provide a more solid foundation for the theses that have flickered across so far, as well as a detailed discussion of their implications. To unforgiving or even malevolent readers who know, however, how many nuances and hesitations are necessary in order to get straight to the point.

The starting point of the previous pages was the *memory of the present*: indeed, this was out of the conviction that this basic mnestic phenomenon reveals in an exemplary way the nature of historical time, or opens the door to a particularly appropriate way of accessing the historicity of experience. We drew concentric circles of ever-greater diameter around this starting point in order to unravel the various threads that make up its weft. Let us again turn our attention to the thickest of these threads. To remember the present means considering the 'now' as a 'back then', thus immersing it in a *sui generis* past (a formal, indefinite, non-chronological one). This past, within which memory situates the event that we are living right now, *is* the potential, or faculty, underlying that same event (language, if it is a matter of dialogue; labour-power, if we are talking about the production process; etc.); conversely, potential *is* a non-chronological, indefinite, formal past. The memory of the present allows us, then, to grasp within the event now underway both the act and the potential, both the generic faculty and its specific execution.

In this reasoning, the most delicate point, the point charged with most consequences, is without doubt the *equivalence drawn between past and potential*. Obviously such an equivalence does not leave unaltered the terms with which it is working. It immediately poses the question: how is it possible to transform the very concept of potential, now that it has been radically temporalised? And then: what weight does this non-chronological past – constituted by potential *as such* – have within our general conception of temporality? We left these two questions in the background, however, largely neglected. The reason is a simple one: the equivalence drawn between past and potential, rather than the fruit of an autonomous reflection, in fact appeared right in the middle of an analysis with a quite separate centre of gravity. It was not much more, indeed, than an auxiliary intermediate link in the chain that was destined to connect critically the pathology of the déjà vu with the supposed 'end of History'. So what is perhaps the most important wall in the entire edifice, ended up declining to the point that it looked like a mere ornament.

It seemed possible to tolerate this inconvenience, when we had to express a rather complex conceptual constellation concerning historical time, all in one breath and without gaps. But it was, still, an inconvenience: one that might encourage, or provide justification for, certain misunderstandings. It could be believed, for example, that potential coincided with the past, or became vested in a temporal aura, only because it became an object of memory within the memory of the present. As we will see, the exact opposite is the case: only because potential is, in itself, past, does it appear as an example of the mnestic phenomenon of the memory

of the present. In order to avoid such ambiguities – if for no other reason – it now seems opportune to turn the order of our reasoning upside-down, such as to put it back on its feet.

First of all we should explicitly and systematically define the temporal dimension of potential (a faculty, language, etc.). As we have already mentioned, however, in defining its temporal dimension we are, in effect, significantly reformulating this concept itself. The second step consists of demonstrating how and why the past *as* potential (or – but it is the same thing – potential *as* past) represents that 'originary time' – the foundation of the habitual chronological sequence – which contemporary philosophy has instead identified with the future. Only at this point will we begin to confront the theme of historicity, now on a wider scale and on a different basis. What, in the last analysis, is a *historical moment?* What role do presence and non-actuality play in this, and how about concomitance and diachrony? Besides: is Heidegger's view, that history is rooted in death, really plausible? The answer to these questions should prepare the terrain for our subsequent discussion on historical materialism: better, on the paths that we should beat in order to defend its corner and to fulfil its promise.

Let us repeat: what follows is a *retreading*, with a different scansion, of problems addressed in the first part of this book. It goes without saying that any authentic *retreading* involves the introduction of extra questions, new theses, and viewpoints that were hitherto ignored. But it is also true that these further developments, permitted by the changing register of our exposition, will fulfil their purpose only if they allow us to *recognise* things that were *already* there in the previous pages; only if they

ultimately prove to be precisely and nothing other than a retreading of these problems – whatever the evidence to the contrary.

1. Chronological Progression, Temporal Order

Potential and act are concepts indispensable to any reflection on temporality. The pair taken together constitute, according to Aristotle, the origin and the guarantee of becoming. Though they reciprocally concern one another, they are two very distinct terms, irreducible to one another: for this reason, something that does not exist can still come into being, whereas something that exists could disappear; for this reason, things develop, mutate, come and go. If the potentially existing coincided with the actually existing, 'no genesis or decay would be at all possible . . . and it would be a lie to speak of future things and past ones'.[1]

Potential and act are the matrix of becoming because the relation between them, which is to say the difference between them, is already and as such a temporal relation (or difference). Potential is that which is not *yet* actual (but can become so) whereas the actual is that which is *no longer* potential (but once was). This pair express the articulation of earlier and later, the preceding and the subsequent, the past and present. The two ways of being are defined as a *before* and an *after*, on the basis of the different positions that they occupy in

1 Franz Brentano, *Sui molteplici significati dell'essere secondo Aristotele* (1862), Milan 1995, pp. 58–9. Brentano is here paraphrasing and interpreting Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, IX, 1047a 10–14.

the flow of time. That said, the temporal position of each of these terms is established not by the clock or the calendar, but depends exclusively on the position of the other: they are correlated through their mutual opposition. Potential is potential in reference to a particular act, just as 'earlier' is 'earlier' than a particular 'later'. Potential and act, when they are defined as a 'before' and 'after', are defining each other. We could not explain the act in isolation from the potential, for the same reasons that prevent us understanding 'after' without an implicit reference to 'before'.

No one can doubt the assertion that potential and act are temporal concepts – but it is also an equivocal statement. It immediately poses an alternative (a rather scholastic one, it is true, but no less unavoidable for that reason). Do potential and act fall *in* time, inscribed as an empirical 'before' and 'after' within its chronological progression? Or do they structure time and set its scansion, ordering time according to the dual axis of 'before' and 'after'? Do they follow one after the other in the guise of 'earlier' and 'later', or do they reveal (and give shape to) the dimensions of earlier and later that define all sequences? Are they temporally articulated, or do they establish the articulation of which they appear to be subjects? In brief, are they *temporalised* or do they *temporalise*?

Nothing would be more mistaken than unilaterally to opt for one or the other of these two interpretations. Precisely because they are the presupposition for becoming, potential and act are not simply phenomena in becoming. On the other hand, because they also occupy a determinate position within the chronological sequence, nor are they mere vestiges of an 'originary time'

extraneous to temporalised experience. The good reasons in support of one view, however numerous or incontrovertible they may be, do not cancel out the reasons for taking the other side. Perhaps what really matters, then, is this *ambiguity* itself. The evidence for an equivocal assertion of the temporal filigree of the concepts of potential and act is, ultimately, rather more convincing than any claim boasting of having specified any single meaning.

Potential and act are temporalised just as much as they temporalise. They occupy a certain position in the unfolding of time, yet, on the other hand, they also determine what this position is. They have to do with both chronological *progression* and temporal *order*. Yet it is not enough to note their amphibious nature. To aggregate their different aspects is, in itself, no more illuminating than the peremptory ultimatum that bifurcates and counterposes them. The decisive point lies, rather, in ascertaining what the nexus is between the specific manner in which potential and act fall *in* time, and the equally specific manner in which *they* determine time. Decisive, that is, in light of the following hypothesis: the pair in question are not only temporalised, nor only temporalising, *because* their peculiar content consists precisely in the juncture, or intersection, between the two. To put it another way: the relationship between potential and act is, first and foremost, a relationship between chronological *progression* and temporal *order*, position and positioning, the empirical 'before' (or 'after') and the horizon of anteriority or posteriority. Within this relationship, therefore, it is necessary to focus on *the order of what is progressing and the progression of what is doing the ordering*, rather than on a certain progression and a certain order.

2. Presence and the Never-Actual

An act always falls *in* time. Each single act is chronologically situated, either being earlier, later or concomitant to another act. It is inserted in an order of succession and converges in simultaneity. It belongs to a *series* (the series of alternating acts which correlate to each different 'now') and combines in the formation of an *ensemble* (the ensemble of coexisting acts which correlate to one and the same 'now'). The act falls *in* time because it is identified with, and qualifies, a 'now'. Aristotle writes: 'Actuality, then, is the existence of a thing not in the way which we express by "potentially" . . . we call even the man who is not studying a man of science, if he is capable of studying; the thing that stands in contrast to each of these exists actually.'[2] This other way of being is resolved in a temporal determination: the *actual* scholar is he who, as well as being capable of studying, is studying *right now*. The actual stands in relation to the potential as now does to not-now, as presence does to latency, and a circumscribed and measurable lapse of time in relation to an indefinite duration.

To be actual means *to be present*. The term 'actuality', which in its common usage indicates the moment in which one finds oneself – today – has raised the hackles of purists, since given its provenance from *actualitas* (and thus from *energheia*, 'act') it ought instead to designate the fulfilment of a possibility, the expression of a faculty: in sum, something being realised. And yet, from a conceptual point of view, this slide from the one meaning to the other is highly perspicacious. We must

2 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book IX, 1048a 30–5.

grasp, within the term 'actuality', the compelling link between the 'now' and the exit from a state of potentiality. Only that which is *actualised* is, properly speaking, *actual*. Acts take on the temporal prerogative of presence in virtue of their negative relation with the potentially existing (which, instead, is always latent and never actual). Precisely because they are no longer potential (that is, because they are no longer not-now), these acts are located within the progression of time along with so many other 'nows', establishing reciprocal relations of anteriority and posteriority. Whatever place it occupies in the flow of time, the act still has its own 'now', and still bears unaltered the stamp of presence (and is thus counterposed to the potential – and not, mind, to yesterday and tomorrow). The chronological past is made up of former *actualities*; the future, of *actualities* to come. The memory and expectation of an act are the memory and expectation of what was, or will be, essentially *present*.

The act is always an object of perception. But the perception of an act is always, in the first place, the perception of a given temporal aspect or position. If we witness an event (for example, a house being built) without considering the categories of act and potential, then we will perceive it well enough in terms of its content; but if we understand the event which we are witnessing as an *act* (as something that has ceased to be potential) then the salient point is no longer the presence of a perception, but rather *the perception of presence*. In the same way, if we refer to a chain of events in a series (for example, the notes of the melody to which I am listening) as a gradual series of *actualisations*, we do not have so much a succession of perceptions, as a *perception of*

succession. The concept of the act, making explicit the presence or actuality of each event, offers perception the appropriate *schema* for thinking the 'now' (or succession of 'nows') as such.

Still a problem, here, is the temporality of potential. Potential does not, as such, fall in time. What chronological measurement would be able to calculate the constant *not-now* of which potential consists? What place would be taken in the flow of 'nows' by the *capacity* to work or to build, the *faculty* of thinking or speaking, or the *disposition* to endure the cold or take pleasure from something? It does not seem possible to back up any coherent answer to this. It is true enough, naturally, that in many cases we do tend to locate potential within an empirical sequence, representing it as something that was there 'just before' (getting hot before it was burnt), 'still' endures (an old man still has the faculty of being able to procreate), or will emerge 'later'. Still, we can easily see that the location of something potential within a determinate time is the consequence of a calamitous *quid pro quo*: it happens, in fact, whenever this potential something is assimilated . . . to an actual one.

If we consider an actual thing (a block of marble) also to be, from a different perspective, something virtual (an artfully sculpted statue) then it might be said that this possibility does fall in time. But, on closer inspection, the marble is chronologically located only on account of what is actual about it. The date mistakenly attributed to the potential thing instead pertains to the act with which it coexists: whatever act that may be, *obviously* earlier or later than others of its own kind. Moreover, the potential appears to have a determinate temporal location when its concept comes to resemble – or is even

juxtaposed to – that of *cause* or *effect*. The causal relation, which undoubtedly implies a chronological scansion, does not concern potential, but only two or more acts. Aristotle writes: 'from the potentially existing the actually existing is always produced by an actually existing thing, e.g. man from man, musician by musician; there is always a first mover, and the mover already exists actually'.[3] And while potential is certainly not the cause of anything, nor can it be said that it is inserted *in* time, taking on the appearances of an effect. The result of procreation is not a potential human, but an actual baby. The effect, as such, is always perfectly actual. The potential is the presupposition or collateral of the causal chain, surrounding it like an aura and providing the background to its unfolding: but in no sense is it a stage or component of this chain.

Potential, as such, does not fall *in* time. Its texture – fully temporal, but not at all chronological – will escape the grasp of anyone who tries to snatch hold of it. For our purposes, we will limit ourselves, for the moment, to some intuitive observations, each of which we will later return to, examine, and radicalise. Let us pose ourselves the question of how a thinking person perceives her own capacity to think. She has the incontrovertible impression that this faculty precedes, accompanies and follows any particular meditation. Equally, the capacity to walk seems to exist before, but also during and after, any given stroll. And indeed, the capacity to speak is what remains when a series of acts of speaking have come and gone. The faculty resembles a uniform duration, a *continuum* that envelops and circumscribes

3 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book IX, 1049b 25–7.

discrete units, single realisations. It is a bizarre duration, however: since it is never present, the capacity to speak is not spread out across a multiplicity of 'nows', and nor can it be broken down into (or measured in) lapses of time. If the act is 'now', potential is 'always': the former is evanescent, the latter is permanent. And yet, the 'always' of potential does not mean that it is perennially present, but rather *that it is perennially unable to coincide with actuality*. The potential is the persistent not-now against which each *hic et nunc* is defined, the unmovable latency which constitutes the horizon (or context) of each dateable event.

But what is it that persists, without ever being actual? Even despite our initial considerations, here we must risk unequivocally choosing our line of march. *What persists as not-now is time as a whole*, all-embracing time, the entirety of time within which succession and simultaneity take place. It allows for becoming and change, but itself remains immutable. It is not expressed in a specific 'now', but nor is it the total sum of real 'nows'. If it were actualised, time-as-a-whole would have to have chronological extension and progression, as well as a myriad of dates: in sum, it would itself fall *in time*. To repeat: precisely because it is *potential*, and thus perennially non-actual, time as a whole does not represent a 'time before time' (and another, and then another, *ad infinitum*).

Augustine of Hippo, wanting to represent becoming with an – inevitably faint – likeness, compared the totality of time to a *readable* text, and determinate times to parts of it, which are each in turn *read* (or which it is expected will be read):

> I am about to repeat a Psalm that I know. Before I begin, my expectation is extended over the whole; but when I have begun, how much soever of it I shall separate off into the past, is extended along my memory; thus the life of this action of mine is divided between my memory as to what I have repeated, and expectation as to what I am about to repeat; but 'consideration' is present with me, that through it what was future, may be conveyed over, so as to become past . . . And this which takes place in the whole Psalm . . . the same holds in the whole life of man, whereof all the actions of man are parts; the same holds through the whole age of the sons of men, whereof all the lives of men are parts.[4]

Time-as-a-whole is not the accumulation of lines recited, but rather the never-actual (that is, *solely* recitable) psalm to which Augustine refers when he writes 'before I begin, my expectation is extended over the whole'. What goes for the psalm is also true of any potential. If the totality of time must be represented as potentially existing, then, conversely, everything that exists potentially, entails the image of the totality of time.

The potential corresponding to an act of a given kind (the capacity to walk – a stroll; the capacity to think – a given meditation; the capacity to speak – a speech) portends the constant non-coincidence of actuality with time-as-a-whole. We cannot conceive the act in separation from potential, because we cannot locate a position of chronological progression without considering the persistence of time-as-a-whole; and conversely, we cannot conceive the potential in separation from the act, because

4 Augustine, *Confessions*, Book III, Chapter 11, 28, 38.

we cannot imagine time-as-a-whole if not on the basis of some passing location *in* time. We should not pass over in silence the crucial aspect of this question, one that demands deeper investigation in many further senses: *the potential is permanent, the permanent is potential.*

The potential is not perceived. Due to its persistent inability to coincide with actuality (since it is the persistent not-now), it is, rather, an object of memory. In comparing time-as-a-whole to a potential psalm, Augustine specifies: 'a Psalm that I know'. It is, then, a text to be re-evoked. It should go without saying, however, that it is necessary carefully to distinguish the memory of what was once actual (attached to the chronological past) from the memory of what has never been present (because it is irrevocably unable to coincide with actuality). To remember potential means to remember the time-as-a-whole within which the past 'now' falls, as does the actual 'now' and the 'now' that shall be. Such a memory accompanies and intersects each perceived actuality, no matter whether it be past, present or future. Above we said that perception provides the act with a *schema* for representing its 'now'. Here we must add that potential, for its part, constitutes the *schema* through which memory touches on time-as-a-whole.

3. 'Eternal things are prior in substance to perishable things'

Aristotle affirms, even if obliquely, the singular temporal status of potential. He admits a fundamental ambivalence with regard to chronological progression (τῷ χρονῳ): the potentially existing precedes the actually existing, and yet

at the same time is preceded by it; it comes 'before' but also 'after'. It is earlier, if we consider a single individual; later, if we examine a series (or better, type) of individuals. Aristotle writes:

> to this particular man . . . and to the corn and to the seeing subject the matter and the seed and that which is capable of seeing, which are potentially a man and corn and seeing, but not yet actually so, are prior in time; but prior in time to these are other actually existing things, from which they were produced. For from the potentially existing the actually existing is always produced by an actually existing thing.[5]

So long as it clings on to chronology, this ambivalence is bound to reproduce itself without coming to any resolution. Potential inevitably appears both earlier *and* later – each of them but also the opposite – because, in fact, neither of the two attributes correspond to it: since it does not at all appear as a determinate fact, it cannot be pinned down to a given 'now', and it thus sits outside of any chronological succession. The endless oscillation between a 'before' and 'after' highlights (and at the same time, masks) the fact that it is radically extraneous to any empirical sequence of 'befores' and 'afters'. The location *in* time of that which, *as such*, cannot fall *in* time, is always two-sided and always equivocal.

As well as examining the relationship between potential and act 'in terms of time' (τῷ χρονῳ), Aristotle analyses it from two further viewpoints: 'in terms of knowledge' (or word: τῷ λογῳ) and 'in terms of being' (τῃ οὐσιᾳ). The

5 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book IX, 1049b 19–25.

change of perspective removes any ambivalence, because it allows for an unreserved affirmation of the priority of act over potential: a logical priority in one case (τῷ λογῳ), an ontological one in the other (τῃ ουσιᾳ). It would, however, be an error to believe that Aristotle ceased to concern himself with time when he discussed knowledge and being. On the contrary, this was precisely where he addressed it in greatest depth. However, what was now at issue was no longer chronological *progression*, but rather temporal *order*; no longer the reciprocal positioning of potential and act within becoming, but rather the way in which the pair taken together lay the basis for and articulate becoming itself; no longer the *temporalised* physiognomy of the two terms, but rather their temporalising vocation.

Though exiting the terrain of chronology, his thesis as to the logical and ontological priority of the act did, however, prolong and extend an element that had already emerged in his examination of chronological progression. We have seen that, for Aristotle, the actually existing precedes the potentially existing in the flow of time, when we are referring not to the single individual but to the series of individuals. Everything that exists derives from other, already actually-existing things of the same type; the seed succeeds a fully grown plant of which it is the product. The chronological anteriority of the act, in the series or type, is that typical of a *cause*: since the cause comes before the act-effect in time, it seems to precede also the potential inherent in this latter. So, his discussions concerning temporal *order* 'in terms of knowledge' and 'in terms of being' exaggeratedly root the relation between potential and act in the criterion of cause and effect.

Let us first look at the problematic against which this

criterion should be measured. We have already noted that causality involves two acts, not potential. The relation between cause and effect is a relation between two different 'nows', one succeeding the other; the relation between act and potential is, instead, a relation between not-now and a single 'now', between the never-actual and the present. Although closely intertwined, the two pairs are heterogeneous and incommensurable. They are perpendicular axes, an X and a Y axis: the present event, the point of intersection between the two, can be connected to both its cause (a prior 'now') and its potential (an enduring non-actuality). Far from mistaking the potentially existing for an effect, Aristotle instead seeks to fit the whole relation between presence and non-actuality within the causal connection, setting the not-now in the series of 'nows' ('from the potentially existing the actually existing is always produced by an actually existing thing'). From a chronological angle, however, this is an incomplete, questionable framing of this relation. In order to give it an unconditional validity, it is necessary to demonstrate that at least in some cases (or at least in certain aspects) the axis of causality does *not* intersect with the axis of potentiality; that there is a 'now' unbound from the not-now. In sum, it is necessary to make clear the sharp asymmetry between the two perpendiculars, in terms of the temporal *order*.

The discussion 'in terms of knowledge' (τῷ λογῳ) is only a halfway step towards this. For Aristotle, 'potential is potential because it is possible for it to become active'.[6]

6 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book IX, 1049b 19–25. The whole paragraph reads: 'Clearly it is prior in formula; for that which is in the primary sense potential is potential because it is possible for it to become active; e.g. I mean by "capable of building" that which can build, and by

Therefore, potential has no name or definition unless there is a *prior* knowledge of the corresponding act (we must know what a plant is, to know what a seed is). Reduced to an almost-now (which will eventually be a fact), the not-now can only be understood on the basis of the particular actuality towards which it seems to tend. Causality is here transposed onto the terrain of learning: the concept of the act is always prior to the concept of potential because it is neither its model nor, indeed, its cause. Unlike chronological priority, the logical priority of the act is univocal and irreversible, even in regard to the single individual (or better, her 'knowledge').

The fulcrum of the argument 'in terms of being' (τῃ οὐσιᾳ) is Aristotle's discussion of the 'first mover'; that is, of the absolute *beginning* of the causal chain. The circular movement of the celestial spheres is continual, unalterable, eternal; so too is time, without pauses or gaps; and movement and time are almost identical: 'But it is impossible that movement should either have come into being or cease to be (for it must always have existed), or that time should. For there could not be a before and an after if time did not exist . . . time is either the same thing as movement or an attribute of movement.'[7] Time-movement presupposes a 'first mover' that produces it, and this must itself also be eternal and imperishable.[8] This mover must be *always*-active, or else

"capable of seeing" that which can see, and by "visible" that which can be seen. And the same account applies to all other cases, so that the formula and the knowledge of the one must precede the knowledge of the other.'

7 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book XII, 1071b 6–11.

8 'As we have said, one actuality always precedes another in time right back to the actuality of the eternal prime mover' (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book IX, 1050b, 3–5).

there would be an interruption in time-movement. Moreover: it must be *only* active, with no potential element (indeed, then there would 'not be eternal movement, since that which is potentially may possibly not be').[9] It is, then, an act that, lacking in any potential, can boast of being prior to the very relation between act and potential. It is a 'now' that, avoiding being at all mixed up with the not-now, precedes the entire interrelation of not-now and 'now', presence and non-actuality. All the intersections between the two heterogeneous perpendiculars (cause/effect and potential/act) are located *after* the starting-point that shapes causality itself, since this 'first mover' produces the time-movement *within which* these same intersections take place. Absent from the act-cause that lays the foundations for time-as-a-whole, potential is confined to a radical posteriority: 'eternal things are prior in substance to perishable things, and no eternal thing exists potentially'.[10]

On the one hand, we have the analyses based on 'knowledge' and 'being', which directly concern the

9 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book XII, 1071b 18–19.

10 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book IX, 1050b 6–8. He continues: 'The reason is this. Every potency is at one and the same time a potency of the opposite; for, while that which is not capable of being present in a subject cannot be present, everything that is capable of being may possibly not be actual. That, then, which is capable of being may either be or not be; the same thing, then, is capable both of being and of not being. And that which is capable of not being may possibly not be; and that which may possibly not be is perishable, either in the full sense, or in the precise sense in which it is said that it possibly may not be, i.e. in respect either of place or of quantity or quality; "in the full sense" means "in respect of substance". Nothing, then, which is in the full sense imperishable is in the full sense potentially existent (though there is nothing to prevent its being so in some respect, e.g. potentially of a certain quality or in a certain place); all imperishable things, then, exist actually.'

structure of temporality, attempting to identify an anteriority which is not at all relative; on the other hand, the recognition of chronological progression, of the endless oscillation inherent within it. Yet it is not enough to underline the gap between these two spheres: in fact, it is rather tiresome. Much more important is to understand how these mutually affect and sustain one another.

Aristotle's thesis as to the logical and ontological priority of the act is an attempt to make sense of the temporal *order* by way of a concept that instead pertains only to what is inscribed *within time* – that which elapses and can be dated. The temporalising character of the relation between the potential not-now and the actual 'now' is expressed on the basis of a term that *per se* only indicates something which is itself *temporalised*. It is true enough that the act, elevated to the rank of first cause, assumes the prerogative of eternity. But since 'act' is synonymous with a specific presence, this eternity is nothing but a transfigured image of the chronological 'now'. The eternal act is a reiterated present, a persistent 'right now', a fragment of time that is appointed to preside over the totality of time.

Let us return for a moment to the discussion 'in terms of chronology' (τῷ χρονῳ). This is different from the others (τῃ ουσιᾳ, τῷ λογῳ) in that it is the only one in which potential is, in certain aspects, prior to the act. Of course, as soon as we pay attention to the series of individuals, this anteriority is lost: but attention to the series is but an index, or reverberation, of the arguments 'in terms of knowledge' and 'of being', since like these it attributes preponderant weight to causality. Only the condition of the single individual exhibits the chronological relation between act and potential in all its purity;

that is, it remains free of any interference from the concatenation of the causal chain. And in the single individual, potential comes before the act.

We could say that for Aristotle, the temporal *order* is distinguished by the priority of the act, while the characteristic trait of chronological *progression* consists, instead, in the anteriority of potential. This is so paradoxical as to contradict and invert the conclusions we would draw from intuitive observation. Potential, which has no determinate positioning *in* time (being constantly not-now) seems chronologically to precede the act. Conversely, the consideration of the structure of temporality poses the act, which is always located *in* time, before the potential, since it takes on the appearances of an eternal act (the foundation or 'first mover' of time-as-a-whole). It is not difficult to see the strong complicity between the two aspects of the question. The chronological positioning of potential is the root of the supremacy of the act from an ontological-temporal point of view. If we did not hold that potential precedes the act within the *progression* of the single individual (with a not-now that prefigures a determinate 'now'), then it would be impossible for it to be positioned in the temporal *order* as its consequence. Its fate is already sealed as soon as the not-now is conceived as almost-now or not-yet-now, and thus as the incubation of a specific actuality. The representation of the way in which potential and act fall *in* time fatally prejudices the representation of the way in which *they* determine time: as such, confusion over the supposed ontological-temporal priority of the act necessarily leads to confusion over the supposed chronological anteriority of potential.

When faced with this one and the same confusion, it is, however, worth focusing on the very meaning of 'potentially existing'. Indeed, it is precisely a limited conception of potential, that which represents it as a deficient approximation to the act (better, as a *ghost* of the act), that allows for its being located chronologically.

4. Unrealisable Potential

One persistent misunderstanding would have us believe that potential is a *potential act* and that the act, conversely, is an *actualised potential*. As such, an equivalence is drawn between faculty and hypothetical action, ability and not-yet-realised activity, intellect and latent thought, labour-power and a possible piece of work. Note that here we are dealing with an act and nothing else: a preannounced act with more or less defined features, but even so, an act and not a faculty. Moreover, thanks to this equivalence being drawn, it is taken as a given that potential always tends towards realisation: that is, to being potential no longer. It seems senseless to suggest that a fact is possible but will never happen.[11] This postulates

11 Otherwise, Aristotle argues, we would lose any plausible distinction between possible and impossible: 'If what we have described is identical with the capable or convertible with it, evidently it cannot be true to say "this is capable of being but will not be", which would imply that the things incapable of being would on this showing vanish. Suppose, for instance, that a man – one who did not take account of that which is incapable of being – were to say that the diagonal of the square is capable of being measured but will not be measured, because a thing may well be capable of being or coming to be, and yet not be or be about to be. But from the premisses this necessarily follows, that if we actually supposed that which is not, but is capable of being, to be or to have come to be, there will be nothing impossible in this; but the result will be

the realisation (or realisability) not of potential as such, but only the potential act, the almost-act, the larva of the act: that which we would not even be able to conceive, if its effective realisation were not imagined in advance. This persistent misunderstanding is both the premise and result of the inclusion of potential within the sequence of chronological progression. If it is reduced to a potential act, potential is dateable (a hypothetical speech has its 'now' in a particular public assembly). And conversely, potential is reducible to a potential act because it is attributed a determinate time – a date. Each of the two aspects implies the other and is implicated by it: as occurs when we follow any circular logic.[12]

Potential is *not* a potential act. As, in turn, the act is *not* an actualised potential. Consider three different levels: (a) the faculty of language, the pure and simple capacity to speak, the generic disposition to impart meaning and communicate; (b) one or several possible utterances, for example the loving phrases nestled within the quirks of a particular idiom; (c) the act of speaking, on each occasion unique and unrepeatable, that realises this or that virtual utterance. The movement from (b) to (c) has nothing to do with the relation between potential and act: if anyone might think the contrary, it is only because they are ignoring or misunderstanding the

impossible, for the measuring of the diagonal is impossible. For the false and the impossible are not the same; that you are standing now is false, but that you should be standing is not impossible' (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book IX, 1047b 3–9).

12 Aristotle's reduction of potential to one or several potential acts becomes explicit in *Metaphysics*, Book IX, 1047b 35–1048a 1: 'that which is "capable" is capable of something and at some time in some way'. Potential can be situated chronologically if it is *something*; but it is *something* only if it amounts to a potential act.

particular status of (a). Both (b) and (c) display, albeit with differing degrees of intensity, the characteristics of *presence*: the real act is a 'now', the potential act an 'almost-now'. Faculty is distinguished, in contrast, by a *persistent never-actuality*. While (b) has the structure of an actual event, but does not yet exist, (a) certainly does exist, but still remains non-present. Potential is distinct from a future action no less than from a present one; (a) is just as different to (b) as to (c).

The relationship between potential and act – (a) on one side, (b) and (c) on the other – is a *negative* relation, hinging on a temporal difference (not-now and a 'now') which it is impossible to smooth over. The act corresponds to presence, or a 'now', because it negates the constant not-now that serves as its backdrop. The present is defined by its divergence from the never-actuality of potential (and not by its counterposition to the past and future written on the calendar). If we accepted as a hypothesis that potential (not-now) were only an eventual act (almost-now or not-yet-now), then it would be necessary to presuppose a second potential, a second not-now, to serve as the negative correlate to *both* the 'now' of the act *and* the almost-now of the first potential. Yet, following this hypothesis, even the second degree of potential would also be an eventual act, and the new not-now only a deferred 'now'. It would thus be necessary to introduce yet another potential to serve as the heterogeneous backdrop against which real and hypothetical actualities could stand out. And so on, *ad infinitum*. This is reason enough for the conviction that the temporal difference between potential and act is neither temporary nor possible to attenuate; that the not-now is not an almost-now sooner or later destined to become a 'now'.

Scholium. The divergence that separates the concept of 'potential' from that of 'potential acts' is inimitably radical in the field of language. What produces a particularly sharp bifurcation is not, however, any obscure prerogative of the capacity-to-speak, but rather the autonomous significance of *langue*, the complex of possible utterances. Only in the linguistic field do potential acts constitute a cohesive and homogeneous *system*, endowed with certain limits. According to Saussure, the value of each single element of *langue* consists only in what differentiates it from all the others: 'a segment of language [*langue*] can never in the last instance be based on anything other than its noncoincidence with the rest'.[13] Compact and self-sufficient though it is, the system of potential linguistic acts must not be mistaken for the generic capacity to speak, nor the utterances that are actually spoken. Saussure repeatedly insists on this double distinction:

> [*Langue*] is both a social product of the capacity of speech and a collection of necessary conventions that have been taken by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty. The faculty for language is a fact distinct from the language system, but cannot be put into practice without it. Speech [*parole*] designates the individual act that realises the faculty by means of the social convention that is language.[14]

13 Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, New York: Columbia University Press 2011, p. 118.

14 From the edition edited by Rudolf Engler: Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Generale*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz 1967–74, pp. 32, 2.

Langue, *qua* act, excludes potential, properly speaking. But it does thus allow us to grasp the authentic nature of each of them, by way of contrast. If we want to study potential and act, we have to look beyond *langue*. Or, if we are looking at faculties apart from the capacity-to-speak (labour-power, memory, etc.) we have to look beyond *langue*'s various weak equivalents, namely the aggregations of potential acts that do not reach the level of systemisation (possible labours, latent memories, etc.). One last observation. When he refers to the temporal relation between *langue* and *parole*, Saussure in fact shares in Aristotle's thesis as to the priority of the act: 'speaking is necessary for the establishment of language, and historically its actuality always comes first'.[15] This notwithstanding, the term that comes later is *not* potential, but the potential act: *langue*. This does leave the question of whether the same is true in Aristotle, with whom Saussure is in agreement. Unaddressed in either of their work is the temporal relation between the faculty for language (potential in the strict sense) and the act of speech (*parole*); that is, between the two poles beyond each extreme of *langue*.

A faculty cannot be broken down into fractions: the capacity-to-think is not subdivided into portions, and there is no percentage of the capacity-to-speak. The single act of thinking or speech, however indistinct, always has to do with the *entire* corresponding potential. When I ask a passer-by for information, I am mobilising the faculty for language as a whole, not some narrow portion of it. Potential is indeterminate, generic, formless, and thus radically different from a potential act, because it is a

15 Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 18.

whole without parts. And it is a whole without parts because it is never itself realised. This, after all, would require a progression in time, the transition from less to more, changing degrees of fullness, a beginning to its actualisation: in short, the abandonment of its potential status. Indivisibility and compactness are analytical predicates of all faculties, indelible requisites of the not-now. Completely different to this, however, is the logical form of the actual. Each determinate act can be broken down into a certain number of elements or phases; besides, it is itself *part* of an ensemble of real and virtual acts of the same kind. This *ensemble*, which comprises a multiplicity of elements which can themselves be subdivided, has no dimension in common with the *undivided whole* that is the faculty: as a consequence, it neither represents nor realises this faculty. The class of utterances is in no sense equivalent to the capacity-to-speak.

The relationship between faculty and execution resembles that between an *irrational number* – which can never be expressed as a fraction – and a *rational number*, which always plays the double role of quotient and multiplier. Examined from the perspective of the act (the rational number), the potential (irrational number) is *infinite*: any attempt to divide it into parts is condemned to go on and on without end. The capacity-to-speak is infinite, with respect to the series of utterances. It is not, however, infinite in a tendential sense – that is, in the manner of the unlimited extension of the class of rational numbers or the inexorable growth of an ensemble of acts. Potential is an already fully-given infinity which accompanies and intersects with each single actuality, that is, each finite member of a given class or ensemble. The capacity-to-speak *qua* undivided whole coexists

with each particular utterance: it is its incommensurable or 'irrational' correlate. Aristotle considered the infinite to be a *sui generis* potential, which has an anomalous and paradoxical character in that it cannot be converted into an act: 'But the infinite does not exist potentially in the sense that it will ever actually have separate existence . . . For the fact that the process of dividing never comes to an end ensures that this activity exists potentially, but not that the infinite exists separately.'[16] But here it seems opportune to change the terms of the question. The exception *is* the rule. Rather than maintaining that the infinite is a specific potential with eccentric connotations, we must recognise the shape of the infinite in *any* ordinary potential. No faculty ever ceases to be so: its non-actuality is persistent, and it cannot be commuted. The crucial point here is not to daydream about a potential without acts – far from it. Rather, it is to accept that acts do not fulfil potential, and do not offer a faithful or even only approximate version of it: they are not, in sum, realised potential. The capacity-to-speak is, obviously, related to concrete utterances, but utterances do not translate the infinity inherent in the capacity-to-speak into their own order.

Since potential is not a draft or a spectre of the act, it is never realised by it. Not only is it not actual, but it *can never* be so. In the first part of this book, we repeatedly said that the performances of a faculty do not deplete it: that the words spoken always bring language to pass only in an partial and incomplete guise, that labour-power always exceeds the actually executed work. Indeed, we located the root of historical practice

16 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book IX, 1048b 14–17.

precisely within the constant gap between potential and act. Now, though, we must add something further that corrects and adds precision to our previous argumentation. Acts do not exhaust potential, for the simple reason that they do not deplete it in the slightest; they do not actuate it completely because they do not ever even begin to do so. What must be put in question is the very concept of 'realisation'.

We could only speak sensibly about the translation of a faculty into a complex of accomplished deeds if the faculty could maintain its own essential requisites unaltered through this transition to a different form of existence. That is to say, it would require the faculty to be realised *qua* generic, undivided, dateless faculty. But it is impossible to conceive of a determinate utterance which is still also an amorphous capacity-to-speak, or of an actuality presenting the not-now. Far from realising potential, the act *negates* it. It is not its development or metamorphosis, but its limit. The utterance puts the capacity-to-speak on notice for a moment (and that moment is the 'now'), challenges it and violates its perennial latency; actuality clashes with the not-now and pushes it into the background. If potential were positively realised, no trace of it would remain: its accomplishment is the same thing as its disappearance. But since it is, instead, contradicted by the act, potential remains the same: it *persists* as a potential that can never be actualised. Potential is neither transitory nor retractable: its temporal prerogative is that of *permanence*.

The only potentials, properly speaking, are those that attest to human beings' poverty of instinct, undefined nature, and characteristic, constant disorientation. Having faculties is the sign of a lacuna: that is to say, it

demonstrates the lack of a pre-given *environment* in which we can take an innately secure place once and for all time. This diagnosis – the credit for which belongs to Herder's 1772 *Treatise on the Origin of Language* – entails a corollary of no little significance. The lacuna, which appears as a faculty, is a *temporal lacuna*. The environment is an uninterrupted presence, the 'now' destined to constant repetition; the lack of this gives rise to the not-now, which appears in the form of an irreversible non-actuality. Potential is intimately connected to disorientation: or rather, it represents its immediate temporal correlate. Precisely for this reason, we must exclude from the ranks of authentic faculties those specialised instincts through which animals participate in a circumscribed and untransformable 'vital sphere'. But we must also exclude those typically human technical capacities and behavioural habits which, filling in for the absence of univocal adaptive impulses, produce an artificial semblance of a stable 'environment'. These instincts and capacities or habits consist of a range of determinate virtual actions (think of the alligator's capacity-to-swim or the expertise for building houses). Language, the intellect, memory, labour-power and the undifferentiated disposition towards pleasure – all of them potentials, properly speaking – are not reducible to a catalogue of potential acts *precisely because* they are not bound to any specific environment. This list – an approximate, and thus disputable one – comprises those absolutely generic faculties that cannot be broken down into fractions and are not liable to realisation: the only faculties, that is, worthy of the name.

Potential, properly speaking, is also the *world*, if by 'world' we mean to say – fully seriously – nothing other

than the *perceptible context* to which the being devoid of any definite environment belongs. A context surrounds and envelops, remaining for the most part unperceived; it is not *in front of us*, but always and only *all around us*. The world-context, which is never reducible to the sum of events and objects that populate it (or could populate it), is material – but it is made up of an *unformed*, raw and indeterminate matter, which cannot be brought to light through representation (since it itself provides the background or boundaries of representation).[17] Augustine spoke of this matter in the twelfth book of his *Confessions*, when he turned his attention to the original state of the universe, the initial creation scene. The 'invisible and unformed' earth from which God created the ordered world was something 'between form and nothing – something which was neither formed nor nothing, something that was unformed and nearly nothing'.[18] The lack of form is equivalent to a lack of actuation: 'I do not know what kind of formlessness there is in these mutations . . . where there is no form there is no change.'[19] He is here speaking of a potentiality that does not fall *in* time: 'For where there is no shape or order there is nothing that either comes or goes, and where this does not occur there certainly are no days, nor any vicissitude of duration.'[20] The amorphous matter guarantees 'the mutability of mutable things', but it does not itself mutate; it makes it possible for 'times and

17 On the world as raw matter, see my *Mondanità. L'idea di 'mondo' tra esperienza sensibile e sfera pubblica*, Rome: Manifestolibri 1994, particularly the third chapter.

18 Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XII, Chapter 6.

19 Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XII, Chapter 11.

20 Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XII, Chapter 6.

seasons [to] be observed and numbered', yet 'time has no hold upon it'.

Augustine's reading of *Genesis* identifies and brings into sharp light a decisive aspect of the idea of the world. This unformed matter is not a preliminary stage that is later surpassed, but rather recurs constantly, coming to bear in every moment and on the most diverse occasions. This matter is the weft of what is 'all around us' – that which we call *context*. To experience the world as context is to experience what is perceptible and yet raw, latent, unrealised ('neither formed nor nothing'), and extraneous to chronological succession. Context and facts belong together; or better, each entails the other. There is, however, a radical discrepancy between their two modes of being: context is potential and only potential, whereas the facts inscribed within it are real or realisable. As we saw already in our discussion of the relationship between faculty and execution, this discrepancy is of a temporal nature: the world is a not-now ('where there is no shape or order there is nothing that either comes or goes') which coexists with the factual present, without ever itself becoming present, a 'now'. Not-now is the temporal synonym of context, that which is 'all around us' (or better, that which is 'all around us' and cannot be converted into what is 'in front of us'). Conversely, context is the spatial synonym of the not-now. This synonymy is the epicentre of the idea of the world.

To conclude. If potential were a potential act, it would be logically and ontologically previous to the real act (τῷ λογῳ and τῃ οὐσιᾳ), while it would precede it in chronological succession (at least as regards the single individual). But potential is *not* a potential act, *not* an almost-now on the verge of entering the series of 'nows'. It is a *perpetual*

not-now, a lasting non-actuality. So how far can we still speak of anteriority, simultaneity and posteriority, with regard to that which bears the mark of permanence? How is the relationship between the potential 'always' and the actual 'right now' configured, if we look at it from the point of view of chronological *progression*? And what different form does this same relationship take if we instead turn our attention to the temporal *order*? In order to spell out our response, it is necessary first of all to understand precisely the peculiar meaning of that *permanence* which characterises the faculty's (and the world-context's) mode of being. Perhaps what is in question here is not permanence *in* time, but, more radically, the permanence *of* time.

5. The Incompleteness of Time

In the chapter of *Critique of Pure Reason* devoted to 'Analogies of Experience', Kant seeks to clarify the manner in which we conceive of time in general, namely time as a unitary whole, the 'substratum of all change'.[21] It is the presupposition of becoming, the field within which succession plays out: precisely for this reason, though, it does not change or pass by. Time-as-a-whole, characterised by permanence and immobility, 'cannot be an object of perception'. In order to conceive it, we must

21 Kant, 'Analogies of Experience. First Analogy: Principle of the Permanence of Substance', Chapter II in *Critique of Pure Reason*, London: Macmillan 1958, p. 214. Furthermore: 'time, in which all changes of appearances has to be thought, remains and does not change. For it is that in which, and as determinations of which, succession or coexistence can alone be represented' (p. 213).

follow a transversal path and settle for an analogous image of it. It is the permanent 'substratum of all change' in empirical experience that indirectly gives account of permanent, unchanging time. According to Kant, this substratum present in phenomena – which lasts while everything else changes and passes by – is *substance*.[22] And the only analogy that allows us to conceive the whole of time (which itself evades perception) is also to be found in substance – the invariant core of the objects that we perceive. Kant writes:

> the permanent is the *substratum* of our empirical representation of time itself; in it alone are relations of time possible . . . Permanence, as the abiding correlate of all existence of appearances, of all change and of all concomitance, expresses time in general. For change does not affect time itself, but only appearances in time.[23]

22 Ibid, p. 214. 'Now, time cannot by itself be perceived. Consequently there must be found in the object of perception, that is, in the appearances, the substratum which represents time in general; and all change and coexistence must, in being apprehended, be perceived in this substratum, and through relation of the appearances to it. But the substratum of all that is real, that is, of all that belongs to the existence of things, is substance; and all that belongs to existence can be thought only as a determination of substance. Consequently the permanent, in relation to which alone all time-relations of appearances can be determined, is substance in the [field of] appearance, that is, the real in appearance, and as the substrate of all change remains ever the same' (Ibid., p. 213).

23 Ibid. In Chapter I, Kant had already sketched out the essential terms of the question: 'The schema of substance is the permanence of the real in time, that is, the representation of the real as a substrate of empirical determination of time in general, and so as abiding while all else changes. (The existence of what is transitory passes away in time but not time itself. To time, itself non-transitory and abiding, there corresponds

It is true enough that time as a unitary whole is permanent but does not itself change. And it is also true that we can only conceive its shape by way of analogy: by looking, that is, to an aspect of our own experience whose salient characteristic is precisely its permanence. But what is this aspect that offers us a perspicacious image of time in general – or better, of its persistence – when it displays its *own* unalterable character? All things considered, it is in answering this question that we find the decisive point. Unlike what Kant maintains, 'the substratum of our empirical representation of time itself' is in fact *potential*, and not substance.

Both substance and potential are permanent: but in diametrically opposed ways. Since 'the real . . . is always identical', substance continues to subsist within each determinate 'now' as a perennial *presence*. Since potential is never realised, it is, instead, perennially *non-actual*, a not-now devoid of any date. And only this latter version of permanence appertains to time-as-a-whole. Indeed, if time-as-a-whole were actual, it would be possible to divide it into periods of greater or lesser length, and it would progress, thus rendering it indistinguishable from that which falls *in* time. Presence and totality stand in a relationship of mutual exclusion: time as a unitary whole, 'the substratum of all change', is an incessant not-now. We could even say that time-as-a-whole is always *anachronistic*: at odds with actuality, extraneous to any given 'now', never at one with any chronological perspective.

in the [field of] appearance what is non-transitory in its existence, that is, substance. Only in [relation to] substance can the succession and coexistence of appearances be determined in time)' (Ibid., p. 184).

What does the expression 'time-as-a-whole' mean? What type of totality does time concern? Let us consider a piece of phenomenal evidence: time seems to be present only when it is not fully played out, when its realisation is still partial and incomplete. This phenomenal evidence is the indispensible presupposition for considering time-as-a-whole, though it is often unreflectively translated into according primacy to the chronological dimension of the future. This presupposition must be developed and amended in various different ways: such as to provoke a *reaction*. There is a strong but calamitous tendency to confuse the totality of time for its total completion, thus removing the 'not' from the intuitive formula 'not completely realised'. Yet the very thing that we seek to comprehend in its totality is, by definition, incomplete: so when we speak of a complete whole, we are certainly *not* speaking about all time. The realisation that takes place here is the realisation of what falls *in* time: if we instead attributed this realisation to time-as-a-whole, we would only end up with a deeply *non*-temporal totality, as if the scourge of some mocking nemesis. So what different path must we follow in order to conceive the shape of the totality *of* time?

The other possibility is that we unreservedly indulge (at least to start with) the phenomenal evidence that time is always incomplete. Here, the concept of totality must conform to its content, even at the cost of taking on paradoxical tones: the totality of the incomplete. We must consider as a unitary whole something that is *as such* essentially incomplete, involute and unrealised. Time is a whole *in that* it remains unrealised (and vice versa: it is unrealised *in that* it constitutes a permanent and immutable whole). But in what sense can something incomplete

– something that cannot be completed – be called a whole? We can call it a whole, on one condition: that its lack of completion is not relative or provisional, but rather absolute and permanent; that its non-realisation does not concern only one 'part' of time, but precisely time-as-a-whole.[24] The intuitive formula 'not completely realised' must be corrected in a manner opposite to that which we just mentioned: it is the word 'completely' that we must remove, not the 'not'. If we take the degree of realisation (or actuality) as our measure, then the totality of time appears as a negative, defective totality, to be conceived in terms of what is missing. Total time is unrealisable: it is never completed because it never even begins to be accomplished. Its permanence relies on its non-actuality: the two are inextricably bound together.

The totality of time is nothing other than the *potentiality of time*. And this is why we can only comprehend this totality by way of analogy with our experience of potential. Time-as-a-whole is shaped like a *faculty* – think, for example, of the capacity-to-speak, a whole without parts

24 Ibid. What is essentially unrealised is not, then, the future, but rather the totality of time in relation to which the various different chronological dimensions are articulated: past, present and future. The phenomenal evidence – there is only time if it has not fully played out – represents the relation between that which falls *in* time and the ensemble *of* time. But it does so in a misleading way, since the two ambits are divided only into the '*already* realised' and the '*not yet* realised'. Time-as-a-whole, far from being 'not yet' played out, is never subject to playing out at all. For its part, that which falls *in* time always takes the form of actuality: even the future we have to wait for is nothing other than a postponed actuality. If we attribute incompleteness – potentiality – to the future, when it instead belongs to time-as-a-whole, then it is more or less inevitable that we will choose the future as the load-bearing axis of temporality, mistaking it for the constitutive 'originary time'. On a similar *quid pro quo* recurrent across much of contemporary philosophy, see below, Part II, section 11, 'Death and history'.

which is permanently non-actual – and like the *world* – think of the perceptible context for existence, always unformed and unrealised, the unalterable backdrop to chronological succession. Potential, the persistent not-now, 'as the abiding correlate of all existence of appearances, of all change and of all concomitance, expresses time in general'.[25]

Time-as-a-whole is not perceptible, because it is not present; and for the same reason, potential is also imperceptible. This poses the question as to whether it is *memory* that best grasps the persistent non-actuality of each of this pair. We mentioned this question at the outset, though only later will we examine it properly. But at this point, halfway between mentioning the question and studying it in depth, it seems opportune to devote some initial remarks to it. Could it be that potential – this not-now thanks to which we can conceive the totality of time – escapes perception precisely because it appertains to memory? Could it be that faculties and the world (and, indirectly, time-as-a-whole) are something to which we must constantly *return*, something that we can only experience with a *retrospective* gaze, something that we *remember*? For now, a summary observation will have to suffice. We included memory among our 'faculties, properly speaking'. Like all the others, it is a perpetual not-now. But unlike in the cases of the other faculties, the not-now is also memory's own relevant field of application. Non-actuality is not just its mode of existence, but also the object of its attentions. That is to say, memory is concerned with the non-actuality of which potential in general consists: it reawakens it and informs us of it. As

25 Ibid, p. 214.

such, faculties and the world (so too, by analogy, time-as-a-whole) are *memorable* – objects of recollection and reminiscence. Memory should thus be considered a *meta-potential*, moreover, since it allows us to experience faculties and the world-context; because, in sum, it is the potential that maintains an open access-route to the other potentials.

However, there remains a striking difficulty – or at least an unresolved question – for the argumentation we have sketched out thus far. Memory engages with and portrays the not-now only if this latter appears to belong to the *past*. The radical non-actuality of potential is not sufficient to demonstrate that memory draws on it, since it is also necessary that this non-actuality take on the *form* of the past. Only the form, it should be understood: we are certainly not talking about a chronological 'back then'. But even so, can it be legitimate to identify the not-now of a faculty as being a 'before' even if this 'before' is indefinite, dateless and in no sense possible to attach to any given present? To state that potential's non-actuality has the traits of the past, and thus is memorable, means to assert the absolute (logical, ontological and above all temporal) *anteriority* of potential with respect to the act. But do we have a solid basis for such a thesis? This is the question that we now face.

6. Kant's Stove

What, ultimately, is the relation between potential and act, faculty and execution, capacity-to-speak and word spoken, the world-context and the facts inscribed within it? In more rigorous terms: what is the relationship

between presence and non-actuality, the not-now and 'right now'? Or even: between time as a unitary whole and one-or-another position in time?

We know that Aristotle proposed a composite solution: if we are looking at the pure and simple chronological *progression* of an individual being, then we ought to recognise that potential precedes the act; conversely, if we turn our gaze to the temporal *order* (studying, that is, the genesis and structure of becoming) then we must admit that the act is unconditionally anterior. Both sides of Aristotle's diagnosis have been put into doubt here: in any case, they must stand or fall together. We have seen that potential is not at all equivalent to a potential act; that the not-now, far from constituting a temporary interlude, is the constant correlate of any actuality. An unrealisable, permanent potential is *not* posterior to the act from the ontological-temporal perspective; nor, on the other hand, does it appear as its antecedent, or presage it in the chronological sequence. This double rebuttal introduces (or, most likely, presupposes) a comprehensive alternative, which is itself composite and two-branched. If we stick to looking at the calendar, what relation is left between the not-now and the 'now' after we have ruled out the idea that the former precedes the latter? And if we instead examine the temporal *order* (on which the very possibility of the calendar depends), what kind of situation takes shape once we have cast aside the priority of the act (or better, of presence)? To be sure, there is a very close connection between the answers to these two questions. Indeed, the way in which we conceive the potential/act couple *in* time has decisive consequences for how we conceive its *temporalising* role.

For the purposes of providing a synthesis of the salient point, it seems opportune to turn back – if only for a moment – to Kant's 'Analogies of Experience'. After arguing that it is the category of substance that provides us with our only empirical image *of* time-as-a-whole, Kant focuses on the succession of phenomena *in* time. He maintains that our experience of the chronological series is hinged on the category of causality. Only the coupling of cause and effect makes it possible to understand 'the succession of appearances';[26] it is only this that allows us to connect a later perception to an earlier one in a non-arbitrary way – indeed, such a connection thus becomes obligatory. The 'after' follows the 'before' just as a given movement follows its motor. Here, however, arises a difficulty of no little significance: 'The principle of the causal connection among appearances . . . applies also to their coexistence, when cause and effect are simultaneous.'[27] A room is warm *while* the stove burns: 'Here there is no serial succession in time between cause and effect. They are simultaneous'.[28] But how can causality – the intellectual rule that alone allows us to represent succession – play its role when it is itself reduced to a relation between simultaneous elements?

What really matters, for our purposes, is the path that Kant takes in order to eliminate this difficulty. We read:

> Now, we must not fail to note that it is the *order* of time, not the *lapse* of time, with which we have to reckon; the relation [of anteriority and posteriority]

26 Ibid, p. 219.
27 Ibid, p. 227.
28 Ibid.

> remains even if no time has elapsed. The time between the causality of the cause and its immediate effect may be [a] *vanishing* [quantity], and they may thus be simultaneous; but the relation of the one to the other [preceding and succeeding] will always still remain determinable in time.[29]

In brief, Kant is saying that the causal law is subject to a double temporal qualification: though these moments appear simultaneously, there is still a scansion of 'before' and 'after'. The two aspects do not cancel each other out, but rather are added together and intersect, because they correspond to two different perspectives: if I limit myself to observing the *progression* of events, I will see cause and effect appearing both at once; but on the contrary, I can see the anteriority of the cause as soon as I take into consideration the more essential field, which Kant calls 'the *order* of time'.

A 'before' simultaneous to its 'after', the distinction between *order* and *progression* . . . the category of causality promises a lot. And, indeed, rather more than it can deliver on. Both the cause and the effect are *acts* – actualities, modes of presence; thus both fall *in* time, and both appear at a specific date. The relation between them, thus being entirely inscribed within the calendar, does not allow for the emergence of any real distinction between the *order* of time and its empirical *progression*. When we speak of 'order' with regard to causality, we mean nothing other than the most extensive and perspicacious examination of the same chronological flux to which the term 'progression' refers. The cause, although temporary

29 Ibid, p. 228.

to the effect within a circumscribed period, also appears to be its antecedent if we look at a wider period (the stove began burning while the room was still cold). During a certain lapse of time, the preceding and the succeeding coexist and implicate one another: but even so, they remain preceding and succeeding on account of 'the time-relation of their dynamical connection'.[30] It is just as true to say that cause precedes effect as to say that cause and effect are simultaneous: but these two statements are true *in different moments*.

The causal nexus portends something that it cannot sustain. So we must ask whether there is some other conceptual constellation up to the task of fulfilling the promises that causality has neglected to deliver on. Whether there is, in sum, a relationship in which the preceding coexists with the succeeding (without however ceasing to precede it, in a certain period); in which both temporal qualifications (anteriority in the 'order' of time, simultaneity in its 'progression') are fully valid *in one same moment*. No doubt, such a relationship does exist: namely, that which lies between time as a unitary whole and the single actualities that follow one another within this whole. Total time, permanent and immutable, is the presupposition of any given 'now', the undateable premise for any given date, appearing as the 'already' or 'before' of each given *act* (whether this be causal or caused). Nonetheless, if we examine the same relation with an eye to chronological progression, we must necessarily reach a different conclusion: precisely because time-as-a-whole is permanent and unchanging, it is always simultaneous to any fragment, or episode, of

30 Ibid, p. 288.

becoming; it is on each occasion *contemporary* to actualities which it also, from a different perspective, *precedes*. In the 'Preface' to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant catches a glimpse of this paradoxical simultaneity, which is not at all as simple as two events both being present at once: 'We are unable . . . in general, to think the stationary in time, the coexistence of which with the variable, produces the conception of change.'[31]

Even if the permanence of time-as-a-whole is not conceivable 'as a thing in itself', according to Kant it can be represented by way of analogy with the invariability of substance. Moreover – still according to Kant – it is possible to portray the succession of phenomena in time thanks to the nexus of cause and effect. As a consequence, sticking to Kant's lexicon, the relationship between the permanent and the changeable, or between the totality of time and chronological succession, indirectly has to do with the relationship between substance and the causal sequence. Here 'Now, we must not fail to note that it is [also] the *order* of time, not [only] the *lapse* of time, with which we have to reckon;[32] and only here do anteriority and simultaneity really go hand-in-hand. We have just seen, however, that total time – which is, of course, permanent, but never fulfilled or realised – is comparable not to substance (whose unalterability is equivalent to an eternal presence) but rather to potential (a perennial not-now). Within finite experience, it is only potential that provides an adequate image of the permanent non-actuality that characterises time as a unitary whole. So that

31 Ibid, p. 36.
32 Ibid., p. 228.

which appears to belong to the relation between substance and causality ought instead be attributed to the relation between potential and act.

It thus becomes possible to formulate more explicitly the thesis on which these pages hinge. The potential/act couple, within which the not-now and the 'now' confront one another (and not two different 'nows', as in the cause/effect binary) is the theatre of both a *diachrony* and a *concomitance*. In terms of the temporal *order*, potential is *prior* to the act: it takes the form of a dateless 'before', the mode of existence of an indeterminate past. In terms of chronological *progression*, conversely, potential and act are always simultaneous: potential is not the prefiguration of the act, but its heterogeneous correlate, its incommensurable shadow. Diachrony as well as concomitance each have a special status. Potential and act, capacity-to-speak and word spoken, labour-power and concretely executed labour, world and facts, do indeed represent a 'before' and a 'after', but a 'before' and 'after' inserted within one same point of time, bifurcating and splitting it in two. For its part, the chronological simultaneity between potential and act should not be mistaken to mean that both are present at once: after all, one of the simultaneous elements – the potential not-now – is never present. Rather, it means the coexistence of the 'now' as such, with its well-defined contents, and a *sui generis* past, that singular and never actual past which constitutes a faculty's (and the world-context's) mode of existence.

7. The Simultaneity of 'Not-Now' and 'Now'

Potential and act are always simultaneous in terms of chronological *progression*. First of all, we will try to clarify this part of the thesis we have just espoused. Undoubtedly, it does require some explanation. After all, we have often repeated that potential, as such, does not fall *in* time. So what right do we have suddenly to say that it is simultaneous to the act in a chronologically determinate moment? In order to dispel the impression that we are making a graceless and incoherent about-turn, it is necessary to bring the crucial point to light: namely, that here we are no longer discussing potential 'as such', but only its *relation* with a complementary, heterogeneous term. And it is only this hypothetical relationship that is inserted within becoming.

We can speak of temporal *order* and of chronological *progression* if – and only if – given an indissoluble relationship between two phenomena or concepts, one of the interdependent poles does *not* fall in time. If they both enjoyed a definite position in the calendar, then the distinction between the two planes would be not just superfluous, but impossible. Yet the relation between what falls in time (the act, the 'now') and what does not (potential, the not-now, that which represents the totality of time) is itself also subject to the distinction that it creates and sustains. On the one hand, it is a relation that *orders*, temporalises, and gives structure to becoming; on the other hand, however, it is also a relation that *progresses*, has a temporalised pattern, and is itself in becoming. And here it is the second variant that is at play. In what sense, and for what reason, is the correlation between non-actuality and presence fully part of chronological *progression*?

The connection between potential and act is drawn onto the terrain of chronology, for the simple reason that one of these terms is always dateable. On each occasion, an unrepeatable instant heralds the meeting of the enduring 'not-now' with the ephemeral 'now': and this instant is the 'now' itself. Though potential *by itself* does not fall in time, it does nonetheless enter into this or that determinate present *in virtue of* its relation with the act. Obliquely, as an echo, that is. The date pertaining to the word that I am saying is the same as the date in which the bond between this word and the capacity-to-speak is visible: and this date is thus also attached to the capacity-to-speak, even if as a merely transitory property. The faculty adopts a temporalised aspect in a specific moment: *while* its single execution is underway. Neither before nor afterwards. But if potential enters into the weft of chronology only *whilst* the act is taking place – as a result of its relation to that act – then we ought to have no hesitation in concluding that it is always *simultaneous* to the act, from a chronological point of view. Here, the possibility of both appearing in the calendar is wholly the same thing as their specific positioning in the calendar. The only way that potential (a permanent not-now) can be situated in time is for it to be contemporary to the only thing that can indirectly draw it *into* time: the act (the ephemeral 'now').

The language faculty irrupts into becoming in concomitance with the phrase that I am speaking. It appears precisely now, as I speak, neither before nor afterwards: but, note, right now it appears as something persistent which was already there before and still will be after the fleeting actual utterance. Labour-power is concretely expressed *during* the realisation of a particular labour: yet, in that transient moment, labour-power is

experienced as permanent and unchanging. The perceptible context that we call 'the world' appears in relation to a determinate fact, in perfect *synchrony* with it: but even then it appears as the perennial backdrop to any conceivable fact. To make one first, almost obvious observation: the things that coexist, here, are not two different temporalised states of affairs, but rather the temporal dimensions of 'always' and 'now' themselves. In sum, we are here dealing with the *simultaneity of the permanent and the changeable*, of time-as-a-whole and a specific position in time, as Kant mentions in his 'Preface' to the *Critique of Pure Reason*. A second, less obvious observation: in chronological progression, the 'always' depends on the 'now', and is its echo or corollary. The permanent exists in function of the changeable: *while* change is taking place and *thanks to* it taking place. Indeed, the permanent is only *potential*. It has nothing in common with the eternal presence of a substance. Because it is radically non-actual, the permanent (the language faculty, labour-power, etc.) needs a fleeting presence (the utterance to which I give voice, the work to which I dedicate myself) in order to latch on to time. The dependence of the 'always' on the 'now' explains the touching, even heart-rending character of each given 'now'. Each act is full of pathos because it allows us to glimpse for a brief second the enduring potential that accompanies it.

As we know, Aristotle devoted himself to refuting the simultaneity of potential and act, which Euclid of Megara's disciples had insisted upon with the declared goal of eliminating any difference between the two terms.[33] He wrote: 'There are some who say, as the

33 See Luciano Montoneri, *I Megarici. Studio storico-critico e*

Megaric school does, that a thing "can" act only when it is acting, and when it is not acting it "cannot" act, e.g. that he who is not building cannot build, but only he who is building, when he is building; and so in all other cases. It is not hard to see the absurdities that attend this view.'[34] In order to pull apart the Megaric pretence of 'mak[ing] potency and actuality the same',[35] Aristotle made use of a chronological scansion: potential *precedes* the act in the flow of time (if we limit ourselves to observing a single being). But it should be understood that simultaneity does not necessarily imply identity. Perhaps, on the contrary, it is only their simultaneity that fully preserves the separation between potential and actual being. In effect, in the last few pages we have already introduced an *anti-Megaric* conception of simultaneity. All that remains is to emphasise its salient traits, such as to shake off at least the most basic misunderstandings.

'Potential exists only in the presence of the act': this assertion, which Aristotle opposed, is perspicacious and possible to share – if we add a little extra clause, namely, 'in time'. Potential exists *in time* only in the presence of the act: the language faculty is dateable only *while* an utterance is taking place. Far from blunting or cancelling out the difference between potential and act, their simultaneity is a decisive expression of this difference. The never-actual faculty falls *in* time only because (and in the moment in which) it is correlated to its wholly

traduzione delle testimonianze, Catania: Università di Catania 1984; and Jaakko Hintikka, *Time and Necessity: Studies in Aristotle's Theory of Modality*, Oxford: Clarendon 1973, especially Chapter 9, 'Aristotle and the "Master Argument" of Diodorus'.

34 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book IX, 1046b, 29–33.

35 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book IX, 1047a, 18–19.

heterogeneous opposite: its execution, which, conversely, coincides with a calculable 'now'. It goes without saying that potential does still exist even in the absence of the act: but, in this case, it is devoid of any date and extraneous to the progression of chronology. By itself, potential is analogous to the time-as-a-whole within which each succession and simultaneity is positioned. Think, for example, of labour-power. In separation from the actual fulfilment of a particular piece of work, the generic psycho-physical disposition to produce is nothing but an *empirical image of the totality of time*. It is in this guise, moreover, that the 'potential to build' plays a decisive role in political economy. The fulcrum of the capitalist accumulation process resides in the buying and selling of labour-power as a pure, still-unapplied faculty – that is to say, the buying and selling of time in general, the backdrop to and presupposition of the consecutive 'nows' in which the performance of labour will be articulated.

Potential exists *in time* only in the presence of the act. But *in what way* does potential exist in time together with the act? What happens, exactly, in the 'when' common to the two of them? How do these two simultaneous elements interact? We have already seen that the act *does not* realise potential, but contradicts it and puts it on notice. The form of concomitance is that of an opposition: the 'now' clashes with the not-now, the specific execution contravenes the perpetual latency of the faculty, the word spoken breaks with the amorphous and undifferentiated capacity-to-speak. The date that the potential obliquely takes on – by virtue of its relation to a determinate act – is the date of its *negation* by that same act. In the chronological field, the permanent appears as that which the changeable is *right now* contravening. We are

quite at odds, then, with the symbiotic juxtaposition for which the Megarians wished and Aristotle dreaded.

Let us think about it the other way around. In order to exclude their simultaneity, we would have to assume: a) that potential, already and on its own account, falls *in* time; b) that potential is equivalent to a 'potential act', in principle already on its way to realisation. Well, it is these very suppositions, which are interlinked and mutually supportive, that destroy at root the difference in nature between potential and act. Or better, they convert it into a simple difference of degree on the same homogeneous scale: if it is the same thing as a potential act, then potential seems like a poor imitation of the real act; inscribed in the calendar, the not-now is reduced to an almost-now, which is always commensurable to the 'now' that it prefigures. Thus the gap between non-actuality and presence, which characterises each single moment of becoming, disappears. The attack levelled against the chronological concomitance of potential and act is thus now turned against its alternative: if the faculty had a date different from that of the execution, then the essential heterogeneity between them would be lesser. Ultimately, to deny their simultaneity fatally leads to the loss of the distinction between them.

8. The Anteriority of Potential

Potential is unconditionally anterior to the act, in terms of temporal *order*. Though these two poles are simultaneous *in* becoming, as soon as we examine the way in which *they* produce and articulate becoming itself, we see that they are a 'before' and 'after'. The difference in nature

– not of degree – between faculty and execution, capacity-to-speak and the spoken word, world and facts, ultimately consists of a radical *diachrony* that has nothing in common with the empirical succession of two events. The aspect that we must focus on, here, is potential's role as the *non-chronological past* of the act.

a) The act is a 'now'. But what is the structure, and meaning, of this 'now'? Let us remind ourselves of Émile Benveniste's observations on the temporal status of an act of speaking.[36] A concrete utterance always refers (at least implicitly) to the present: but, remember, this is a present that it *itself* establishes through the mere fact of being uttered. The adverb 'now' demonstrates the actuality of the discourse that is being voiced; it expresses the time in which it *is spoken*, unambiguously identifying this with the time in which it *is*. Like other deictics ('I', 'this', 'here', etc.) the 'now' does not refer to any pre-existing reality, but only 'to the utterance, unique each time, that contains [it]'.[37] This diagnosis seems straightforward enough, yet it also comprises a point of departure that alters the very notion of *actuality*.

According to Benveniste, the pre-eminent task of terms

36 See Émile Benveniste's 'On the Nature of Pronouns' and 'Subjectivity in Language' in his *Problems of General Linguistics*, Miami: University of Miami Press 1971, as well as his 'Language and Human Experience', *Diogenes*, vol. 13, no. 51 (1965).

37 Benveniste, *Problems of General Linguistics*, p. 219. *All* deictics refer to the utterance of which they are part, to the present utterance, at the moment in which they are uttered. As such, *all* deictics implicitly entail the 'now'. 'This' is always the 'this' that I am saying 'now', a this-now; equally, the 'here' is a here-now, and so on. The temporal deictic, the 'now' itself, qualifies this entire class of words (of which it is also one particular element).

such as 'now', 'I', 'this' and 'here' is to provide 'the instrument of a conversion that one could call the conversion of language into discourse';[38] deictics guarantee the *transition* from the pure capacity-to-speak ('before the utterance, language is nothing but the possibility of language')[39] to the concrete utterance; they represent the threshold that separates and at the same time correlates the potential and the act. So says Benveniste. But here we must add our own comment. In the case of the deictic 'now', the passage from faculty to execution – 'the conversion of language into discourse' – exhibits exquisitely *temporal* features. That is to say, it means the transition from an indeterminate 'before' (language/faculty) to a specific, univocal 'after' (discourse/execution). 'Now' means: *after* we have emerged from the non-actuality of potential. The adverb does indicate the unrepeatable moment in which we are speaking, but it indicates it as the moment in which the speaker detaches herself from a past in which there was only 'the possibility of language'. Since the discourse's present (or rather, the present that the discourse itself establishes) is the result of a conversion, it thus entails a certain 'posteriority'.

In general, we tend to consider truly actual only that which comes *after* a situation in which it was not already present. The most immediate of presences always appears to be a *consequence*, standing out from a now-faded 'back then'. Indulging this intuitive impression, Kant writes: 'the present, so far as it has come to be, refers us to some preceding state as a correlate of the event which

38 Ibid., p. 220.

39 Émile Benveniste, 'L'appareil formelle de l'énonciation', *Langages*, vol. V, no. 17 (1970), p. 14.

is given; and though this correlate is, indeed, indeterminate, it none the less stands in a determining relation to the even as its consequence'.[40] What is all-important, however, is adequately to interpret the 'after' that moulds and defines any authentic actuality. Certainly it has nothing to do with a chronological 'after'. When we say that today's act is subsequent to yesterday's act, distinct from it in its date and contents, we bring to light the relation between two presences with different positions *in* time: but this does not explain what it is that assures both of them (the earlier one no less than the latest one) the rank of *presence*. Indeed, only something which *already* embodies actuality can be dated 'before' or 'after' in the calendar. So chronological posteriority presupposes the presence of which it is meant to give account.

This does not mean rejecting the intuitive impression on the basis of which we consider the actual event to be an 'after something'. Indeed, we ought to recognise a second kind of posteriority that does not belong to the realm of chronology. Not only is the utterance that is currently being spoken subsequent to the utterances that have been spoken hitherto, but it also marks an 'after' with respect to the capacity-to-speak. It is wholly at one with 'now' precisely because it is previous to that which does *not* fall in time: dateless potential, an absolute 'back then'. Moreover, the same goes for utterances spoken in the past: these too, if considered individually, were so many 'afters' in relation to the capacity-to-speak. *Presence as such is later or subsequent*: purely and simply on account of its insertion within becoming, not in terms of a specific position within it. This 'after' – which is not at

40 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 225.

all relative – appertains to each and every act of whatever date and content, simply because it takes place. The act is *no longer* not-now: it takes place *after* it. If the not-now were a mere logical category (the opposite of actuality), this 'no longer' would be a trivial tautology. But it is not. The not-now exhibits the very familiar features of faculties and the world-context: thus it has its own autonomous texture. So, taking obvious license with Kant's words, we could say: faculties and the world, *that is*, the not-now, are the 'preceding state' to which 'the present refers us . . . as a correlate of the event which is given', 'though this correlate is, indeed, indeterminate'. Except that we ought to specify that the not-now is a 'previously existing state' destined to remain *forever* indeterminate.

Every act has a *double past*. On the one hand, the mass of previous actualities that preceded it *in* time and, in some measure, caused it. On the other hand, enduring potential, which has no home within chronological progression and is always and on each occasion anterior to whatever is inscribed therein. The act is the *crucible* within which these highly dissimilar 'befores' meet and intersect:

PAST I → ACT

(old actuality) 'now'

↑

PAST II

(potential or not-now)

This double posterity, characteristic of any given act, is at the origin of numerous *quid pro quo*s. Often the past-potential is reduced to a chronological past, confusing the

faculty for some identifiable past execution which is attributed the value of a canon or imitable example. Think, moreover, of the mnestic phenomenon of the déjà vu, which we analysed in the first part of the book: she who believes that she is reliving an event that already took place, when in reality she is dealing with something unprecedented, is doing nothing other than dressing potential up in the clothes of a remote – wholly fictitious – actuality which now seems to be repeated even in its slightest details. Awestruck versions of the theory of an 'eternal return' even paint the déjà vu in the colours of something truly metaphysical: they postulate the inexorable recurrence of already-spoken words and already-accomplished actions, whereas in fact all that we incessantly 'return' to is the capacity-to-speak and capacity-to-do. The *quid pro quo* is closely related to the experience of *repetition* (whether that be real or illusory): the prototype of the now-repeated act – namely, some *repeatable* prior act – surreptitiously yet necessarily mashes the characteristics of the chronological 'back then' together with those of the potential 'back then'. It is precisely this usurpatory juxtaposition which explains the *perturbing* (in the strict Freudian sense) aura and ambiguous sense of authority in which the repeated phenomenon is often clothed.

Let us recapitulate. In the temporal *order*, which is delineated by the relation between potential and act, the traditional primacy of presence falls apart: far from once again taking on the role of barycentre and dividing line of temporality, the 'now' is shown to be derivative – or rather, *posterior*. The act establishes the category of the present in so far as it comes 'after' the faculty and the world-context; it plays a *temporalising* role, thus

contributing to determining the becoming in which it, too, is absorbed, because it is configured as 'no longer not-now'. Potential is the past of the act. Yet this is an indefinite past, one that cannot be narrated and has no plot of its own, since it was never itself actual. Potential is not simply anterior, but establishes and holds open the very horizon of anteriority. In the relation between faculty and execution we thus see a disparity (without which it would be impossible even to speak of temporal *order*, as distinct from chronological *progression*): the act is the empirical 'after' of a pure 'before'. It is, indeed, subsequent to something, but this something is the *past in general*. That which falls *in* time is posterior in relation to time as a unitary whole, as represented – by way of analogy – by the permanent not-now of potential.

b) We know that Aristotle analysed the potential/act couple from three different angles: in terms of time (τῷ χρονῳ), in terms of being (τῃ οὐσιᾳ), and in terms of knowledge (or word: τῷ λογῳ). If we wanted to maintain something of the shape of Aristotle's exposition – albeit only on the surface – we could say that up until this point we have discussed the priority of potential τῷ χρονῳ, in a directly temporal key, while from now onward we shall privilege the other two paths. Now we will examine this same priority in terms of being (τῃ οὐσιᾳ); and subsequently, in terms of knowledge (τῷ λογῳ). Our argumentation concerning 'what it is' (being) and how it is to be understood (knowledge) will not, however, leave behind our discussion of temporality. On the contrary, they will be limited to reformulating and delving deeper into this very question. To say τῃ οὐσιᾳ and τῷ λογῳ still means to say τῷ χρονῳ, 'in terms of time'.

It is here worth again making reference to a theme we have already examined in detail. In chronological *progression*, potential and act are always simultaneous. The language faculty, which is not by itself dateable, is obliquely inserted into becoming on account of its relation with an ephemeral utterance; this relation is apparent *when* the act of speaking takes place; from this, it follows that the capacity-to-speak is inserted *into* becoming only at the precise moment *of* becoming when the utterance is uttered; the potential thus shares the date which happens to appertain to the act to which it is correlated. We also understood, however, that the two simultaneous elements do not co-implicate one another harmoniously, and nor do they remain indifferent to each other: rather, the act *negates* the concomitant potential, such that this latter is eclipsed. The faculty *is* contemporary to the execution, yet only to the execution that challenges and contravenes it. So, given these connections that we know about already, let us pose ourselves the question: what is the essential nature, the οὐσία, of potential?

In the instant in which the act is accomplished – simultaneous to its accomplishment – the potential is banished. That instant is the present, the 'now'. But if potential is *now* banished, then it must previously have existed; but *back then* it was truly itself (because it had still not been negated). Its positive character appears in *retrospect*: as a previous state that glimmers for the first and only time at the very moment in which it is surpassed. The essence (οὐσία) of potential thus consists in the 'before' which is *now* negated by the act. That which is currently forbidden can only be named and defined by way of the imperfect tense: we ought to speak of the language faculty or labour-power not in terms of 'what it is' but rather

'what it *was*'. This does not mean to say that the faculty *was* something positive in some nook or cranny of the past but not any more. Conversely, the faculty itself configures a *sui generis* past, which is not reducible to chronology because, in conformity with its own essence, it is always *something that was*.

The prior state characterised by potential is not at all an enigma. This undateable 'back then' corresponds to the condition of *disorientation* typical of living beings who do not enjoy any pre-given and invariant environment. We have already noted that potential is emblematic of this condition, since it exhibits the *temporal lacuna* (the not-now or non-actuality) in which the lack of a comforting environmental home initially results. Generic faculties (not to be confused with a finite collection of potential feats) are proof of a lack of specialised instincts and clearly express the *indecision* that derives from this. Through a sort of homeopathic process, these faculties oppose the threatening indeterminacy of the world-context with their own indeterminacy or plasticity, thus offering a refuge barely distinguishable from the danger itself. The condition of disorientation and indecision *precedes* any historical practice, and thus evades chronological definition: we shall use the term 'pre-history' to designate this condition. We will examine *pre-history* at some length in the third part of this book; nonetheless, it is also worth here sketching out its physiognomy. The essence of potential, its οὐσια, is pre-historic: a past that does not belong to any epoch of its own, but rather accompanies each successive actuality. Better, it is a past that we experience only when it is refuted and displaced by the concomitant actuality. The act is a polemical *reaction* to the lack of 'environment' to which potential

attests. Each act negates the pre-historic indecision and disorientation inherent within the faculty; it is a rebuttal of the sublime 'before' in which there *was* nothing but instability and uncertainty: it poses a temporary remedy to the temporal lacuna (or enduring not-now) that distinguishes existence without an environment.

In its essential nature, potential is *something that was*. The use of the imperfect tense here inevitably recalls the formula with which Aristotle defines essence in general: τό τι ἦν εἶναι, that which the being *was*, *quod erat esse*.[41] The meaning of this expression is a controversial one: for some the ἦν, the 'was', appears to mark the causal anteriority of form with respect to matter; others have

41 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book VII, 1029b 13: ἐστι τό τι ἦν εἶναι ἑκαστῳ ὃ λεγεται καθ'αὑτό, the essence (literally: the that which was being) of each thing is that which that thing is by itself. We know that Hegel drew a useful connection between essence and the past, thus re-evoking Artistotle's τό τι ἦν εἶναι: 'The German language has preserved essence [*Wesen*] in the past participle [*gewesen*] of the verb to be; for essence is past – but timelessly past – being' (G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, § 807, at marxists.org). Less well known, perhaps, is Schelling's attempt to understand the essence of God not only as an 'eternal presence' but also as an 'eternal past'. In his *Ages of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press 1942, p. 148) he writes: 'But if a present cannot be conceived which does not rest on a past, then also no eternal present can be conceived which is not grounded in an eternal past.' A little further on (pp. 150–1) he writes: 'An eternal being conscious cannot be conceived, or it would be like unconsciousness There is no becoming conscious (and therefore no consciousness either) without positing something as past . . . all consciousness has what is unconscious as ground, and, just in coming to be conscious, this unconscious is posited as past by that which becomes conscious of itself. Now it is certainly not conceivable that God has been unconscious for a long time and then become conscious. But it is quite conceivable that the unconscious and conscious in God were comprehended in the same indivisible act of becoming conscious, the conscious as what is eternally present, but the unconscious with the character of what is eternally past.'

understood it as an epistemological expedient allowing Aristotle to establish a thing's constitutive traits in its pure form, *before*, that is, taking into consideration the multicoloured mass of accidental and contingent predicates. A great merit of Pierre Aubenque's *Le problème de l'être chez Aristote*, is that he instead remains steadfastly loyal to the 'innocently temporal sense of the imperfect', that imperfect to which we make recourse in order to indicate 'a lasting continuity which extends back retroactively before a given event which is assumed as a point of reference'.[42] Aubenque's interpretation allows us fully to understand the insurmountable gap which separates the essential nature of potential, which we have just outlined, from Aristotle's οὐσια. Each is at home in the dimension of the past, and the phrase τό τι ἦν εἶναι pertains to both – but the two are entirely different in terms of the value and field of application they give to the imperfect.

Aubenque shows that, for Aristotle, the 'was' has its origin in *death* (if we are talking about a living thing) or *stasis* (for an inanimate object that moves): demise and stillness are the moments in which a being is distinguished, as its 'what it was' now retroactively plays out.[43]

42 Pierre Aubenque, *Le problème de l'être chez Aristote*, Paris: PUF 1962, p. 466.

43 'It was the death of Socrates that shaped the essence of Socrates: that of the unjustly condemned just man. It is his death that allows us to dissociate the contingencies of Socrates' historical existence and the accidental aspects of his life from the dignity of his essentially Socratic attributes. The essence of a man is his transfiguration from history into legend, from a tragic – because unforeseen – existence into a destiny fulfilled: and this transfiguration only takes place through death. In more abstract terms, what is imperfect about a man – concerning what is not because it is no longer – does not weigh on his essential attributes (if, at least, we understand this to mean an attribution properly speaking, not just in generic terms)' (Ibid., p. 469).

Essence pertains to already-concluded biographies, to trajectories that can be recapitulated in light of their conclusion. Only a dead person can be said to be essentially wise: we cannot say this of those who still risk collapsing into stupidity; but we would have to say that the dead person *was* in essence (ἦν εἶναι) wise. The disclosed past of a potential is, evidently enough, counterposed to the past of a cadaver. After all, the potential's past is coextensive with any event or action or discourse in life: the 'was' is not the archive of a finite series of accomplished acts, but rather appears in concomitance with each single act as it is accomplished, since the act refers back to the not-now which always precedes it. Potential is the unrealised past against which the living measures itself *while* it lives: faculty, world, pre-history, time as a unitary whole.

Death means no longer having such a past,[44] losing the dateless 'before' and having the horizon of anteriority blocked off (the lack of a chronological future is only a corollary or echo of being deprived of the potential past analogous to *time-as-a-whole*). Death thus means reaching a perfect actuality. Aristotle's οὐσια is an imitation of the act of death: the words spoken and the works brought to completion are irrevocably separated from the capacity-to-speak and the capacity-to-do. But the capacity-to-speak and the capacity-to-do are not accidental little wrinkles,

44 From the standpoint of Aristotle's ουσια, a dead man is he who has no future; from the viewpoint of potential, however, the dead man is he who has irrevocably lost the past-in-general, the dimension of the 'back then', the ἦν. The religious interest in our post-death status, the representation of a 'beyond' composed of gratification or suffering, does not signal a yearning for the future, the desire to have a future despite everything, but the impulse to conserve our own non-chronological past, our own potential.

but rather represent the most stable and enduring (that is, least contingent) traits of the living human. So it is only the 'she was' uttered during the funeral wake, confirming and commemorating the end of the difference between potential and act, that captures the essence of the dead person. This imperfect adorns the dead person with a certain number of salient memories, and requires in exchange that we forget the other 'she was': the substance of the living, characteristic of the non-chronological past within which the capacity-to-speak and capacity-to-do are inscribed.

c) We ought finally to address the anteriority of potential with respect to the act from the cognitive perspective: or, in Aristotelian jargon, its anteriority τῷ λογῳ (in terms of 'knowledge', or 'the word'). How do we become aware of a faculty? With what means can we imagine it and obtain information about its essential nature?

Potential is a perpetual not-now. We do not, of course, find anything out about the not-now by way of immediate *perception*: the exclusive object of learning by perception is, indeed, a presence. It might sometimes be believed that the potential not-now dovetails with the future: but if this were so, then to know it would require a *prefiguration*, in the sense of an *expectation*. But this would be quite a mistake. I can prefigure and expect the hypothetical actuation of a certain event: i.e., the event itself, in so far as it will become present and perceptible; but I cannot prefigure or expect potential itself, which evades any realisation. Accurate prediction is incongruous with something that even in the future is bound to remain latent and unperceived. So what are we to do? Where direct sensory inquiry and prefigurative reconnaissance fail, we must instead turn to *memory*. We know

that the not-now pertaining to a faculty is contravened and placed between parentheses by the concrete execution that is right now underway. The faculty, which is now negated, existed as such only previously, in an undateable past, *before* its actual eclipse. The positive essence of the faculty can only be comprehended *retrospectively*, therefore. The mind grasps potential only by way of memory. I grasp an accurate notion of the capacity-to-speak or labour-power when I recall and remember them. The anteriority of potential in terms of knowledge, τῷ λογῳ, does not depend on the fact that we know it before we know of the act (from the chronological perspective, in fact, each of the pair comes into view simultaneously), but rather from the particular *mode of understanding* relevant to potential. Potential is memorable, and only memorable, and appears as something previous to the concomitant act, which is instead observed by our perceptive apparatus.

Perception and prefiguration always regard a presence (whether it be real or hypothetical), that is, an act (whether it be current or eventual). Memory, on the contrary, branches in two, and applies to both a former actuality – to definite events which are now far back in time – and the persistent not-now of potential. As it bifurcates, memory gives account of the *double* past that precedes each and every 'now'. The memory of an act reproduces the perception we had of it when it took place; it re-presents what was present in a past moment; it allows us to recognise a being or action that we already observed on some other occasion. The memory of potential, conversely, does not hinge on some previous perception: it concerns something (a pure 'before', the horizon of anteriority, the past-in-general) that allows

only for recollection, since it was never present. To be cognisant of a faculty *ex novo* is wholly equivalent to *re*cognising it; it is memory that *originally* depicts the capacity-to-speak and labour-power. When memory refers to a potential, it establishes the very notion of that which it is re-evoking: it does operate a reproduction, but, I repeat, this is a *productive reproduction*. The retrospective image, far from inferring its object, determines it for itself: it casts aside the distinction between an 'original' and a 'copy'. Since potential exists in the mind only in virtue of memory, it is both the prototype and the replica, the manuscript and the reprint, the sound and the echo.[45]

How does the mnestic understanding of potential concretely play out? In what circumstances, in ordinary experience, does a *productive reproduction* take place? Decisive, here, is memory's inclination to give the past-form even to events or states of affairs that are *not* past ones. Indeed, it is precisely in this manner that the dimension of the 'before' is liberated from chronological progression, ceasing to be identified with the mass of previous actualities. The phenomenon that attests to this inclination (and characteristically so, not at all as an

45 Consider Kierkegaard's observation that 'Repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward' (Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1983, p. 131). Repetition is an operative memory, through which it restores the past *thing*; memory is a bodiless repetition, through which it replaces the past thing with its *image*. So in the *productive reproduction*, all distinction between the previous thing and the mnestic image evaporates. As concerns potential, the return-to (recollection) and return-of (practical reiteration) match flawlessly. The productive reproduction is as much 'repeated backward' as it is 'recollected forward'.

exception) is the *memory of the present*: 'What is duplicating itself at each moment into perception and memory is the totality of what we are seeing, hearing, and experiencing.'[46] Typical of this phenomenon is the fact that mnestic activity neither presupposes nor retraces perceptive activity, but rather accompanies it perfectly simultaneously, thus affirming itself to be an autonomous mode of understanding. The memory of the present was discussed in great depth in the first part of this book – and now it deserves fresh attention.

It is worth insisting on one aspect, above all else. When we remember the current moment while we are living it, the authentic object of the memory is not, in fact, the present as such, but rather the indefinite (non-chronological) past in which the present is inevitably immersed, merely on account of being remembered. There are thus three – and not two – elements at play, here: a) the perceived present, captured in terms of an act; b) the remembered present, a hybrid intermediate link (since here this same act is taken back to its state of having been possible, the condition of a 'potential act'); and c) a dateless past, which is exactly the same as the potential. If a) is discourse, c) appears as the language faculty; if the 'now' is articulated as pleasure, then the indeterminate 'before' consists in the disposition towards enjoyment; and so on. The third element (past-potential), precisely because it is indefinite, requires the second – which, instead, has a precise empirical physiognomy – if it is to see the light of day and be experienced. Though c) appears to be a simple refraction of b), almost as if it were its residue, c) is in fact both the cornerstone and the

46 Bergson, 'Memory of the Present and False Recognition', p. 148.

result of the whole process. We could even say: c) is the conclusion of a syllogistic inference of which a) and b) are only the premises.

A comparison with reminiscence is again useful here. Reminiscence is the mnestic process by which we remember something that we did not know that we knew, since it was initially masked by our forgetting even the fact that we forgot it. Aristotle holds that reminiscence is 'a certain syllogism' (*syllogismos tis*):[47] a present image (greater premise) awakens the memory of a past image (lesser premise) which, in turn, through affinity or contrast, hunts for a further, unforeseen object (conclusion): and this is the prey of the struggle to remember. The memory of the present is also a deduction based on three terms; it, too, arrives at a *quid* that could not have been foreseen. However, this apparent similarity masks a radical heterogeneity. The premises of reminiscence are two very different images – after all, they refer to different events. Conversely, the *syllogismos tis* at work in the memory of the present sets out from a pair of representations (the perceived present and the remembered present) which are wholly *identical* in their factual content: both a) and b) hinge on what we are seeing, hearing and experiencing right now. The only distinction between these premises is their temporal index: the remembered present, the middle term of the inference, is inscribed in a pure or formal 'back then', which is extraneous to the calendar. The double consideration of one same *hic et nunc* does not lead to the recuperation of another state of affairs which had until then been forgotten (as in the case of

47 Aristotle, *On Memory and Reminiscence*, 453a 10, at classics.mit.edu.

reminiscence, conversely). The conclusion of this syllogism instead concerns the *temporal difference* that alone is able to distinguish between two premises which are otherwise the same. That is to say, it concerns the non-chronological past in which the current moment is transposed. This past is the original and unforeseen *product* of a peculiar mnestic *reproduction*.

Every self-reference hinges on the relation between act and potential. The formulas 'language which speaks of language' and 'thought that thinks about itself' mean: an act of speech which gives account of the capacity-to-speak, and an act of reflection which refers back to the faculty of reflection. Every self-reference has a temporal structure and re-evocative tonality. Indeed, it involves a diachrony, linking the act's 'now' to the potential's indeterminate 'already back then'. *Every self-reference is a memory of the present*. As we have just seen, when we remember the instant that is currently underway, we are remembering the faculty correlated to the act that is being executed: for example, the faculty of thinking, if the current instant is characterised by an act of meditation. Every self-reference that is brought to a successful conclusion (and not caught up in vicious circles) is always indirect, mediated by memory; it is fulfilled through a retrospective gaze on the *hic et nunc*; it has the form of a *sui generis* syllogism whose conclusion is not a state of affairs, but rather the past in general.

Scholium. Whenever the memory of the present is not lived as such, but instead gives rise to the pathological feeling of déjà vu, self-reference is perverted and transformed into *a regression to the infinite*. We know already that in déjà vu, potential falsely appears as a previous act,

the original act from who-knows-what date that the current moment seems to be perfectly faithfully repeating. The language faculty, for example, is fetishistically reduced to one or several utterances prior to the current one. The regression to the infinite is provoked by the attempt to grasp the archetypal act that is now apparently being retraced. I utter a phrase: I have a cat; then I create its meta-linguistic double in quotation marks, 'I have a cat', thus intending to demonstrate the model at the basis of the phrase in question. But this model is an evasive one. The first level of meta-language presupposes another, more comprehensive one ("I have a cat"), in turn referring to a third level ("'I have a cat'"), and so on, in an interminable search looking ever further backward. It is interminable because the thing that we are constantly pursuing is not one original act of speech, but rather the capacity-to-speak pure and simple (which is not commensurable to any determinate act of speech, however old or recent, real or possible). The regression to the infinite is nothing but the dynamic image – whether mercurial or feverish – of that same aporia which, in the déjà vu phenomenon, instead seems to have been petrified.

There are at least two good reasons for attributing memory the role of a *meta-potential*. The first is clear enough: it is the faculty that allows us to experience all other faculties, as well as the world *qua* amorphous perceptible context. The capacity to remember is the condition of possibility for understanding the various figures through which the potential not-now is expressed. The second reason is no less important, but is more tortuous, and requires that we lay out its premise. Memory, too, is an object of experience and understanding. Memory, too, like any attitude or disposition, is a

not-now untouched by perception. In sum, memory, too, is known by way of a mnestic *re*cognition; or better, by way of a *productive reproduction*. As well as having a memory of the capacity-to-speak or of labour-power, we also have *the memory of the capacity-to-remember*. Indeed, there is reason to believe that this latter is the foundation and framework for any subsequent re-evocation of potential. So what is it that distinguishes the capacity-to-remember, if we consider it something that we (re)cognise rather than a fount of knowledge?

Memory, which is in turn objectified and illustrated, merits the title *meta-potential* because it constitutes the *genus* of which the other faculties are *species*. The capacity-to-speak and labour-power can exemplify only in a partial and defective way the non-chronological past of which potential consists. Their defining content (loquacity and poiesis, respectively) is not, in fact, immediately temporal. They are a dateless 'back then', but this 'back then' is implicit, instilled within (and hidden by) some spurious other element. The only content of the capacity-to-remember, on the contrary, *is* the dimension of anteriority, the 'back then' *as such*. Memory thus allows us to see the *temporal substratum* common to all faculties; it incarnates the non-chronological past (genus) of which these are only particular examples or concretisations (species); it portends a still-unarticulated potential without any name of its own.

In his *De Trinitate* (Books X and XIV) Augustine sees a fundamental analogy between the faculties of the mind and the personas of the Holy Trinity. Memory is the image of the Father, the intellect imitates the Son, and will corresponds to the Holy Spirit. And yet the Father, though only one of the three figures, also alone comprises

the whole Trinity.[48] In the same way, memory, though representing a single prerogative of the mind, also coincides with the mind in general. Part and whole, both at

48 Augustine, *De Trinitate*, X, 11, 18, at ccel.org: '[T]hese three, memory, understanding, will, are not three lives, but one life; nor three minds, but one mind; it follows certainly that neither are they three substances, but one substance . . . whatever else they are severally called in respect to themselves, they are called also together, not plurally, but in the singular number. But they are three, in that wherein they are mutually referred to each other; and if they were not equal, and this not only each to each, but also each to all, they certainly could not mutually contain each other; for not only is each contained by each, but also all by each. For I remember that I have memory and understanding, and will; and I understand that I understand, and will, and remember; and I will that I will, and remember, and understand.' Identical in substance but distinct in terms of the way in which they enter into relation with the other two, these faculties offer a perspicacious image of the Trinity. Nonetheless, Augustine observes in Book XIV, often the mind does not know itself in an explicit manner and thus ignores or forgets that it is memory, intelligence and will. But does the analogy between the mind and the personas of the divine thus fall apart? Not at all, Augustine responds, because in any case the mind still retains an *implicit awareness* of the mind: a sort of unconscious, preliminary and invariant memory that contains the seed of the faculty's full articulation. The mind, 'when it is not conceiving of itself, it appears that it is not indeed in its own sight, nor is its own perception formed from it, but yet that it knows itself as though it were to itself a remembrance of itself' (XIV, 6, 8). For this reason, the memory-Father *implicitly* anticipates the Trinity as a whole: 'we must inquire in what way understanding (*intellectus*) belongs to conception, while the notion (*notitia*) of each thing that is in the mind, even when one is not thinking of it, is said to belong only to the memory. For if this is so, then the mind had not these three things: *viz.* the remembrance, the understanding, and the love of itself [that is, will]; but it only remembered itself, and afterwards, when it began to think of itself, then it understood and loved itself' (XIV, 7, 9). And again: 'if we refer ourselves to the inner memory of the mind by which it remembers itself, and to the inner understanding by which it understands itself, and to the inner will by which it loves itself, where these three always are together, and always have been together since they began to be at all, whether they were being thought of or not; the image of this trinity will indeed appear to pertain even to the memory alone' (XIV, 7, 10).

once, it is the attitude underlying any other attitude. The proof is the manner in which self-reflection takes place. Being cognisant of itself, the mind confirms its capacity-to-remember, capacity-to-think and capacity-to-will. But the mind – finding nothing strange or unusual within the mind – is only cognisant of itself in a single guise: re-cognising itself in virtue of a mnestic performance.[49] It is a memory, therefore, that generates its understanding of the capacity-to-remember, the capacity-to-think and the capacity-to-will. Moreover: the mind as a whole not only always *has* a memory of itself, but it *is* this memory, this capacity to re-call itself or to re-cognise itself. As such, the various faculties understood thanks to memory, are also a specification or an offshoot of memory. The capacity-to-remember is the *faculty of having faculties*. In a double sense: it is the cognitive access-route to the multiple particular attitudes, and also the genus or unitary substratum of this multiplicity. This double sense corresponds to the double meaning of the concept of *meta-potential*, which we examined just above.

Scholium. The mind is cognisant of itself by way of a memory. But the mind is always present within the mind. Thus, Augustine concludes, self-reflective re-evocation results in a *memory of the present*. It was here that this bizarre oxymoron, subsequently used only by Bergson, made its first appearance. The expression had to be defended against predictable objections:

> But someone will say, that is not memory by which the mind, which is ever present to itself, is affirmed to

49 See Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XIV, 10, 13.

> remember itself; for memory is of things past, not of things present . . . But let anyone who denies that there is any memory of things present, attend to the language used even in profane literature, where exactness of words was more looked for than truth of things. 'Nor did Ulysses suffer such things, nor did the Ithacan forget himself in so great a peril.' For when Virgil said that Ulysses did not forget himself, what else did he mean, except that he remembered himself? And since he was present to himself, he could not possibly remember himself, unless memory pertained to things present. And, therefore, as that is called memory in things past which makes it possible to recall and remember them; so in a thing present, as the mind is to itself, that is not unreasonably to be called memory, which makes the mind at hand to itself.[50]

The object of memory is not, to repeat, a more or less immense mass of mental acts, but rather *the mind as a trinitary potential*: the capacity-to-remember, the capacity-to-think, the capacity-to-will. But already for Augustine the different faculties were all comprised by one single faculty, the memory, designating that which designates the mind as a whole. The *memory of the present*, with which the mind knows itself, is, then, in the first place the *memory of the capacity-to-remember*.

50 Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XIV, 11, 14.

9. A Double Game

The relation between potential and act, not-now and 'now', non-actuality and presence, has an amphibious character. It participates *in* becoming, and, at the same time, also constitutes the cornerstone and framework *of* becoming itself. It is inscribed *in* chronological *progression*, but on the other hand determines the temporal *order* from which this progression originates. Such a relation seems to forbid any attempt to draw a solid boundary between the temporalised phenomena and the fundamental structures of temporality, the empirical appearance and the hidden recesses. From the outset, the potential/act couple is established above and beyond any such boundary, displaying a marked inclination towards playing a double game.

It is necessary briefly to demonstrate this inherent ambivalence. Within chronological progression, potential and act are *simultaneous*; vice versa, in terms of the temporal order, the two terms are positioned as a *before* and *after*, the faculty being the indefinite past of the execution. So concomitance, but also diachrony; diachrony, but also concomitance. Kant imputed the responsibility for this double requisite to the causal nexus (remember the example of the stove and the heated room), whereas in fact it pertains only to potential's relation with the act. But to recognise this is far from exhausting the matter. What is really at issue, here, is to grasp the intersection or chiasm between concomitance and diachrony.

The potential not-now and the actual 'now' do not cease to *order* time into before and after, even when they are progressing *in* time simultaneously; nor does the fact that they order it by way of their essential discrepancy

mean that they are not progressing in time in unison. A before and an after thus share the same date; conversely, it is a pair of simultaneous elements that articulate the 'before' and the 'after'. The object, or field of application, of concomitance, is a diachrony: the *concomitance of the diachronous*. In turn, the diachrony appears within a concomitance: the *diachrony of the concomitant*. As far as the potential/act dyad is concerned, it is misleading to go on speaking about a simple chronological progression or an inconspicuous temporal order, when what instead always prevails is a middle zone in which these ambits achieve hybrid form – or rather, in which each entails the other. If we place the accent on the concomitance of the diachronous, then we ought to speak of the *progression of that which also orders*. If, instead, we were stressing the diachrony of the simultaneous, then we ought to bring into relief *the order established by that which is also progressing*.

This type of magnetic storm, which stirs up and mixes together hitherto carefully separated points of view, is all the more important for that very reason. It highlights the obstacles faced by any attempt to illustrate the link between potential and act through categories (temporal order, chronological progression) that in fact *presuppose this relation*. Potential, the enduring not-now, represents time as a whole; the act, the evanescent 'now', indicates a determinate position in the calendar. And time-as-a-whole (potential) and the thing present within time (act) are not even conceivable outside of the bind that connects them. It is this *relation* – which is originary – that sustains these two correlates as different and indeed incommensurable poles. The distinction between the totality of time and temporalised reality depends on (and originates

from) their preliminary intersection. Only presupposing this intersection – *which is* the potential/act binary – is it legitimate to speak of either an 'order *of* time' or 'progression *in* time'. We ought not be surprised, then, that when these categories are called upon to give account of their *own common foundation* (the potential/act binary), they blend into one another, are mixed up in an inextricable tangle, and again tend towards indistinction. The formation of a middle zone, or no-man's-land, between two planes that we previously deemed inassimilable, reveals, even if obliquely and *a posteriori*, that they have one and the same root.

What have we learnt from this brief look at the temporal status of act and potential? We must now cast aside all those unilateral formulations that, in isolating one particular perspective, stand outside of our magnetic storm. The amphibious or ambivalent character of the dyad in question coincides with its most *immediate* mode of existence. It counts not in the last analysis, but in the first. For the purposes of expressing this character, it must, naturally, be situated within the no-man's-land in which the distinction between 'order' and 'progression' is blurred and becomes uncertain. As we know, here it is the *concomitance of the diachronous* (or – but it is the same thing – the diachrony of the concomitant) that predominates. In compliance with this predominance, we must say that *potential and act are an always-simultaneous 'before' and 'after'*; the not-now precedes the 'now' with which it also coexists; the pure past, captured in the language faculty, is contemporary to the empirical present which is on each occasion articulated by the really-uttered word. Such are the *elementary* – thus they cannot be further broken down

– propositions suggested by this belated glance at the temporal status of act and potential.

We would understand little about the potential/act couple if we did not examine them in terms of time. An example: the two terms' radical *difference* (of nature, not degree) is apparent only if they are understood as a past and a present. Moreover, it is not difficult to see that this same couple itself alters and deepens our understanding of time in general. Example: when they assume the features of potential and act, the past and the present no longer designate successive moments, but concomitant dimensions. The temporal concepts (not-now, now, simultaneity, diachrony, etc.) used to analyse the relation between faculty and execution do not come out of the analysis unchanged. The peculiar object to which they are applied deforms and complicates them, altering their basic meaning. The past represented by the capacity-to-speak or labour-power is something other than the ordinary past represented by a repository of already-spoken words and already-accomplished labours. The relation between faculty and execution, which required explanation, thus from a certain point onward itself becomes the true explanatory key. This circular movement (the *explicandum* which retroactively acts upon the *explicans*) is, perhaps, the distinctive trait of a materialist approach to the question of temporality. Or, at least, of an approach that renounces surreptitiously drawing on the resources provided by theology. We can only consider time with the aid of a phenomenon which it has itself allowed us to consider; on condition, understand, that this phenomenon can in exchange provoke a drastic *re*consideration of the temporal notions initially mobilised in its own regard.

If we develop our interpretation of the potential/act couple on the basis of time, pushing onward with a certain tenacity, then we will ultimately – almost inadvertently – find ourselves interpreting time on the basis of the potential/act couple. A *temporal* inquiry into the modalities of the possible and the real on each occasion turns into a *modal* inquiry into temporality. The diversion – or better, change of purpose – is inevitable. This has arisen again and again over the previous pages; indeed, with difficulty would we point out anywhere that it is entirely absent. Here, however, this diversion must be made explicit and expounded in full. It is now necessary to clarify in what manner the coexistence of potential and act, not-now and 'now', past in general and determinate present, is *historical time*'s supporting structure and condition of possibility.

10. What Is a Historical Moment?

Potential is the past of the act – of any act, whether it be nestled in some long-ago epoch, on the point of taking place right now, or lying far in the future. It is the non-chronological antecedent of any dateable event. It plays out behind all that which attains the rank of the present. It precedes the 'now' as such. Thus the *potential past* is the fulcrum of temporality. If this expression were not supremely ambiguous, it could simply be termed 'originary time'. This 'before', which does not correspond to anything real, is the red thread through and around the weft of becoming; it is the constant backdrop to the yesterday, today and tomorrow on the calendar; it delineates the horizon against which the

succession of actualities stand out. The potential past exhibits *time-as-a-whole*, permanent and impossible to segment, within whose terms 'all change in phenomena' must be thought. Reciprocally, time-as-a-whole does not appear except in the form of the *unrealised past*: a 'past' because it is always anterior to that which on each occasion falls *in* time; but 'unrealised' because if it were gradually enacted then it would be possible to subdivide it into chronological phases or periods, thus itself also assuming the aspect of a phenomenon taking place within time.

Temporality is characterised by the *primacy of the past*. Such a formula demands careful consideration. We do not, of course, mean to say that the events already stashed in the archives are more important in organising the experience of time than are the events of today or the near future. The supremacy of the past derives, rather, from its *duplicity*: on the one hand, a collection of accomplished facts, on the other a potential that can never be actualised. The past is the only dimension of becoming that has a non-chronological double, or, if we prefer, a *transcendental alter ego*. Only the 'back then' is not limited to a mass of determinate contents but also appears as an autonomous *form* (the past-form) and a pure *horizon* (the horizon of anteriority). The present and the future are always empirical, since they are indissolubly attached to one or several concrete *acts*: hypothetical in the first case, prefigured in the second. We cannot speak of a non-chronological principle of the present or future. Conversely, it is legitimate to distinguish between the empirical past and the past in general, between former actualities and the dateless 'before'. Thus it was opportune, indeed necessary, to point out the mountain-ridge

that divides the memory of words spoken years ago from the memory of the language faculty.

The potential past is *pervasive*. It coexists with the events and actions that were, are, and will be. Each instant of becoming entails the partnership – but also the irreparable separation – between non-actuality and presence, the indefinite 'back then' and the 'now' crowded with events. All events – May 1968, some obscure episode of our adolescence, Müntzer's speech against Luther . . . – intersect, while they are really taking place, with the non-chronological past into which potential congeals. When we are talking about potential with regard to an ensemble of events on which the sun has now set, it appears as the (pure) *past of the* (empirical) *past*. When it is considered in terms of an act that is still underway, for example the essay on historical time that I am writing, then the faculties to which it is correlated instead constitute *the past of the present*. And lastly: with respect to the aleatory labours and the uncertain pleasures that stud the future, labour-power and the disposition towards pleasure *will* be something *anterior*, something on which it *will* be necessary to cast a retrospective gaze. In this case, labour-power and the disposition towards pleasure amount to *the past of the future*. Such a schema does, perhaps, favour the intuitive representation as to the pre-eminent role that the 'back then' plays in the articulation of temporality. But this is not, of course, devoid of its own problems. As long as we content ourselves with underlining the pervasiveness of the potential past, it appears to accompany the three empirical times as an external attachment or uninfluential counterpoint. On the one hand, this presupposes these three times without asking too much about their formation and structure; on

the other, it sets down an incomputable 'before' adjacent to each of them. This is simply lazy, and demands a sharp correction. As we shall see, the prerogative of pervasiveness is the static reflection of a tangle of rather more decisive relations.

The potential past is *productive*. That is, it contributes to determining the various regions into which we usually divide the sequence of chronology: the present, the (dateable) past, and the future. It is not limited to intersecting these three empirical times, but also plays an important role in their genesis. More generally, it establishes and preserves the *historicity* of becoming, of each segment or interstice of becoming.

When we examine the concept of the *present* and the meaning of the adverb 'now' in the light of this potential past, its productivity becomes sharply apparent. It suffices, here, to recall the results of an analysis we previously developed at length. The 'now' is characterised by an essential *posteriority*. Only that which comes *after* can be called 'actual'. I repeat: not *after* a myriad of other now-faded actualities, but after the not-now potential. An act of speech establishes the present and makes it dovetail with its own unrepeatable execution, precisely because it leaves behind the perennial latency of the language faculty; that is, because it waves goodbye to a past (one not recorded in the calendar) in which there was only 'the possibility of language' (Benveniste). *The 'now' has the character of an 'after'*. But the 'after' is wholly dependent on its 'before'. We must then conclude that the 'now' exists only in relation to the potential past. Or rather, that the potential past, far from accompanying an already-given present in a parasitical fashion, instead contributes to defining its salient traits.

There is more. Potential and the act are a 'before' and an 'after'. But – here is the complication – they are an always-simultaneous 'before' and 'after'. As we have seen, we must designate the nexus between them in terms of the concomitance of the diachronous. What does this simultaneity imply? The instant that I am living resembles a field of forces in tension, since it comprises both a posterior pole (the act) and an anterior one (potential): they both constipate and lacerate it. As a consequence, the instant that I am living does not at all coincide with the 'now': the apparent synonymy conceals a discrepancy. If we were to draw an equals sign between the concrete *hic et nunc* and the act, actuality, the 'now', then we would only be grasping one of the two simultaneous aspects; that is, only one part or one aspect of . . . the concrete *hic et nunc*. A terminological distinction is indispensible here. The instant that I am living – understood as the instant in which the simultaneity between act and potential, spoken word and language faculty, particular performance of labour and labour-power, takes place – will from now onward be indicated with the epithet *historical moment*. Actuality in the proper sense of the word will instead be termed the *present*. To be sure, the historical moment is nothing other than the present understood in its genesis: an 'after' inseparable from the 'before', that is.

Scholium. In coining the phrase 'contemporaneity of the non-contemporary',[51] Ernst Bloch usually meant the survival of primitive mentalities and antiquated customs

51 See Part II of Ernst Bloch's *Heritage of Our Times* (Cambridge: Polity 2009) as well as his *Differenzierung im Begriff Fortschritt* (Berlin: Akademie der Wissenschaften 1956).

even within fully developed capitalist society: such as the barter economy operating side-by-side with the International Monetary Fund, or Chinese immigrants in California who maintain their traditional family structure despite also working in the software industry. Yet it is here necessary to introduce a more radical meaning of this expression. We should understand *contemporaneity of the non-contemporary* to mean, first of all, the coexistence of the faculty and the execution, the 'before'-potential and the 'after'-act, the non-chronological past and the determinate present, which characterises each historical moment. Since the simplest cell of temporality consists of two diachronous elements, it has a hybrid – or better, *anachronistic* – nature. The contemporaneity of the non-contemporary is originally expressed in the fact that the immediate and indivisible *hic et nunc* is not only perceived but also remembered while it is being lived. If we were not familiar with this fundamental anachronism, the fulcrum of any historical moment, we could not be alert to the countless empirical anachronisms apparent within a particular historical moment (the barter economy, the stubborn traditionalism of the software-producing Chinese family, etc.). It is true enough that capitalism itself foments the contemporaneity of the non-contemporary. But this is not so much a matter of the coexistence of technology and ancestral superstitions, as the litany repeated throughout the decades would have it. Rather, the crucial point lies in the theatrical portrayal of the plot of act and potential, the indefinite 'back then' and the dateable 'now'. Mature capitalism, as we shall see in detail in the third part of this book, is the epoch in which the radical anachronism on which the historicity of experience itself depends comes to the surface, brought into relief as a most concrete phenomenon.

The eminent requisites of the historical moment are its *dual directionality* and its *incompleteness*. We will examine each in separation, but with one proviso: there is an iron bond of reciprocity between them. Since the single historical moment is composed of an anterior and a posterior pole, it offers a miniaturised vision of the two directions in which any diachronous relation plays out: forward and backward. The divarication of the *hic et nunc* into a 'before' and 'an 'after' establishes both a regressive (or retrospective) orientation, from the 'after' towards the 'before', and a progressive (or prefigurative) one, from the 'before' towards the 'after'. It is on the basis of these two complementary orientations that the historical moment on each occasion seems its own precursor and successor. Let us now turn to the second requisite. The historical moment is *unsaturated*. Incomplete, lacking. Nestling within it is an unrealised core: potential, the non-chronological 'past'. Moreover, there is history precisely and only because non-actuality is wedged within presence, such as to constitute the blank space (or undefined value) of the instant that I am living. The faculty is never itself accomplished through the sum of its individual executions; the world-context remains amorphous and potential, whatever the facts that populate it; the not-now never transforms into a 'now'. The faculty, world and not-now hold open a *lacuna* within the instant. And this lacuna requires *filling*. But what kind of filling can the historical moment hope to offer – even indirectly – when it is itself irredeemably unsaturated?

The two requisites are independent, or better, symbiotic. Neither only dual-directional or only incomplete, the historical moment is, rather, dual-directional in its incompleteness and incomplete in its dual directionality.

Both the diachronous orientations inherent within the *hic et nunc* are full of lacunae. The regressive axis, from the 'after'-act towards the 'before'-potential, leaves a blank space; the progressive axis, from the 'before'-potential towards the 'after'-act, starts out from an indeterminate and unrealisable premise which the posterior pole could not possibly fulfil. The search for the filling – as for the lacuna – is also dual-directional. That is, it also plays out both forward and backward. We explicate the instant of saturation by extending our retrospection ('after' → 'before') and prefiguration ('before' → 'after') *beyond the confines of the single historical moment*, in the direction of what preceded it in time and what will follow it in time. It this thus an extrinsic saturation: the unrealised core of the instant that I am living directs this instant towards other instants that have already been or are still to be lived. The regressive filling of the lacuna is wholly the same as the *construction of the* (empirical) *past*; the progressive filling is nothing other than the *construction of the future.*

The historical moment stipulates relations of affinity or difference with regard to multiple past events (the Paris Commune, a text by André Breton, some bitter love affair, etc.), in virtue of its characteristic retrospective orientation: 'after' → 'before'. The *hic et nunc* identifies its own antecedents, picking out a myriad of concrete historiographical 'back thens', because its texture already embodies a non-chronological 'back then'. The starting point in the construction of any vivid 'once upon a time' is the posteriority of the act with respect to the concomitant potential. The 'after', the phrase that I am uttering, stretches back towards the 'before', the language faculty. But this antecedent is unsaturated and indefinite: certainly,

it does not constitute a solid state of affairs that we could stop to look at. In order to fill in the undefined value of the historical moment, retrospection turns to other former actualities. Thus it reaches out for the empirical past, using it as an emblem and ersatz version of the potential past. The memory of speeches and labours stashed away in the archive of time surreptitiously articulates the contemporary experience of the capacity-to-speak and labour-power. An ensemble of more or less remote past events (the Commune, the surrealist's text, etc.) is called upon to incarnate the potential concealed within the *hic et nunc*. As such, today's potential is dressed up in the equivocal clothes of a tradition or example. In exchange, the traditions and examples which the *hic et nunc* uses as its mirror maintain an aura of unresolved virtuality.[52]

The historical moment produces the future on account

52 Benjamin's insistence on the need to 'redeem the suppressed past' is well known. Within this past he located an unrealised, potential, unsaturated aspect which ever anew demands to be reprised and developed within the present moment. 'The only writer of history with the gift of setting alight the sparks of hope in the past, is the one who is convinced of this: that not even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious' ('On the Concept of History', Thesis VI). Remaining faithful to Benjamin's impulse and conceptual lexicon, we ought, however, to add two qualifications. Firstly: this or that empirical episode of the chronological past 'enters into a constellation' with the present moment *precisely because* the present moment itself entails the past-in-general – potential – as one of its intrinsic components. Secondly: that which was a fact in a more or less distant past seems to retain a certain unrealised potentiality *precisely because* potentiality in and of itself only exists as that which *was*, 'already back then', τό τι ἦν εἶναι. The fulcrum of the 'dialectical image' of which Benjamin speaks is the relation between the two types of past: factual past and non-chronological (potential, unrealised) past. A dialectical relation, indeed, since each of the two terms reflects the other to a certain degree, for a moment taking on its trappings and representing it.

of that same internal diachrony (separation into an anterior and posterior pole) which also allows it to access the empirical past. Yet in the case of the future, it is the progressive orientation 'before' → 'after' which prevails. The starting point in the prefiguration of anything desired or feared 'still to come' is the anteriority of potential with respect to the concomitant act. The 'before', labour-power, looks to the 'after': to the labour that is now underway. But the specific execution anchored in contextualised processes is not commensurable to the generic faculty. Far from using up potential, acts never commute it – even in part – into their own mode of existence, just as rational numbers never offer an adequate correspondent to the irrational number. The 'after' does not complete the 'before'. In order to redeem the *hic et nunc*, which is full of lacunae, the progressive orientation heads beyond its confines and opens up the future. Other 'afters', set in a chronological succession, portend the eventual filling-in of the blank space encapsulated within the historical moment: and yet they always postpone this anew. Prefiguration is thus applied to a jumble of actualities that are still to come, in the customary forms of conjecture and expectation. It is only in order to realise the (potential) past that we construct the future.

Retrospection and prefiguration risk collapsing into *fetishism*. If I attribute the features of today's potential to an act which took place in times past, then inevitably I will venerate this past act as an *origin* charged with destiny, one on which I continue to depend. Equally, if I attribute the task of exhausting potential to a future act, then I am passing it off as the *end* towards which the whole of becoming is tending. Fetishism of the origin, in one case; fetishism of the end, in the other. This double

fetishistic illusion vanishes, however, when we understand that yesterday's event (the presumed 'origin') and tomorrow's event (the much-vaunted 'end') are themselves 'afters' linked to a dateless 'before'; that is, when it becomes clear that these events are themselves inserted in unsaturated historical moments of their own. The lacuna is also present in the empirical past and in the future which were meant to fill it in. The former *hic et nunc*, too, was a field of forces in tension in which the not-now coexisted with the 'now'. At the *hic et nunc* which we await with bated breath will, too, be dual-directional and incomplete. So in what does the relation between different historical moments consist? In their *specularity*: this being a prerogative which shares nothing in common with continuity or causal influence. The specularity of the filled-in and the empty. The potential and unrealised side of the instant I am now living demands saturation, retrospectively in past acts and prefiguratively in future acts. And yet this instant is itself also the object of prefigurations and retrospections: it was foreseen and will be remembered. So the different instants swap roles. As a definite actuality, the instant that I am living provides a progressive filling to the already-lived instant (or better, the lacuna within it) as well as a regressive filling to the instant that is still to be lived (to its undefined value).

11. Death and History

The potential past, whose pervasiveness and productivity we have already brought into relief, is the cornerstone of historical time: it establishes it and characterises all of its meanderings. However, we cannot fail to mention that to

affirm the *primacy of the past* clashes with much of contemporary philosophy, which is rather more inclined to set temporality and historicity under the aegis of the future. Heidegger, on whom this proclivity is entirely dependent, stated that 'having-been arises from the future in [a certain] way'.[53] Alexandre Koyré paraphrases: 'The dominant temporal dimension is the future, which takes priority over the past.'[54] And Kojève, interpreting Hegel in light of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, adds: 'the Time in which the Future takes primacy engenders History'.[55] We could go on and on like this: the chorus of authors who elevate the future to an 'originary' and foundational time is both numerous and well-attuned. If we wanted to

53 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, New York: SUNY 1996, p. 300.

54 Alexandre Koyré, 'Hegel à Iena' (1934), in Roberto Salvadori, ed., *Interpretazioni hegeliane*, Florence, La Nuova Italia 1980, p. 157. Koyré writes: 'Time does not reach us "from the past", but from the future. Duration is not drawn out from the past to the present. Time is constituted by the extension – or better, the externalisation – of the "now", but, once again, not by being drawn out or enduring. It is, on the contrary, from the future that we arrive at the now. The prevalent "dimension" of time is the future, which is, in a certain way, anterior to the past. This insistence on the future and its primacy over the past in our view constitutes Hegel's greatest originality.' Koyré's essay marked a watershed in readings of Hegel, to the extent that Alexandre Kojève described it as 'a conclusive article, which is the basis of my interpretation of the *Phenomenology*' (Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 134).

55 Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 135. Just before this (p. 134) he had given the following synthesis of the crucial point: 'In the Time that pre-Hegelian philosophy considered, the movement went from the Past towards the Future, by way of the Present. In the Time of which Hegel speaks, on the other hand, the movement is engendered in the Future and goes towards the Present by way of the Past: Future → Past → Present (→ Future). And this is indeed the specific structure of *human* – that is, *historical* – time.' Here we have an almost word-for-word reassertion of Heidegger's theses on temporality: except that in an act of none too little anachronism, they are instead attributed to Hegel.

develop a detailed response to these positions, we would need nothing less than a whole new book. But the critical discussion has, in its main aspects, *already* been carried out. And in the only way immune from falling into prickly subalternity: that is, seeking clearly to bring into relief a different conceptual constellation with regard to temporality. In the pages that follow, we will limit ourselves to extrapolating just one theme, which is, however, capable of serving as a sort of litmus test. It is in this regard that we must make our clash with the 'philosophies of the future' explicit. The theme in question – very much central to Heidegger's theoretical framework – is the *nexus between historicity and death*.

Heidegger writes: 'As a mode of being of Da-sein, history has its roots so essentially in the future that death, as the possibility of Da-sein we characterized, throws anticipatory existence back upon its factical *thrownness*... *Authentic being-toward-death, that is, the finitude of temporality, is the concealed ground of the history of Da-sein.*'[56] Let us try to pick out some of the threads that are knotted together here. The future is the predominant temporal dimension only because it is home to death. History takes its origin from a future with an end point; or rather, from the future *as* end point. But in what sense does the prospect of an end point make us historical? The really crucial point is that Heidegger *identifies death with potential*. For the living, the end of life is never actual. Death is incumbent in each instant, but it retains the characteristics of a pure possibility: and it constantly remains as such, since Da-sein never experiences this possibility's realisation. And it is this negative

56 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 352.

dynamis that historicises. Death, absolute potential, allows us to recognise the relative – concrete and particular – potentials which innervate existence: 'Because anticipation of the possibility not-to-be-bypassed also disclosed all the possibilities lying before it.'[57] The end-point of the future, which is inevitable but also eventual, brings us back to what we have always been: a capacity-to-be. In the light of our capacity-to-be, we understand the inheritance of the past as an ensemble of *repeatable* possibilities, to be subjected to examination: 'Da-sein may choose its heroes.'[58] But if in the legacy of tradition we find the 'silent power of the possible',[59] rather than an irrevocable compulsion, then we are also able to take free *decisions* (or at least adopt non-predetermined behaviours) in the present situation. Through repetition and making decisions, Da-sein demonstrates its own authentic historicity.

For Heidegger, we exist historically because we are mortal. Or better: because we are not unaware that everything will come to an end, but rather have to deal with this end as a permanent possibility. Here, I would like to suggest that this is to turn matters on their head. We have to deal with the permanent possibility of the end *only because* we exist historically. Death in the strong sense – that is, as distinct from simply deceasing – does not found historicity, but presupposes it. In order to clarify this assertion, let us start from the beginning, following down a path that crosses our own: namely, by reference to Kojève's thesis on the 'end of history'. We refuted this

57 Ibid., p. 244.
58 Ibid., p. 352.
59 Ibid., p. 360.

thesis in the first part of this book, but all the same it is useful in outlining a 'counter-factual' reasoning.

Kojève retraces Hegel's steps. For him, too, temporality is rooted in the future. More precisely, in a future that is destined to come to an end. From any perspective, what is decisive is 'the presence of the end of Time from its beginning and throughout its whole duration'.[60] Kojève extends being-towards-death from the individual to the whole species: 'the end of History is the *death* of Man, properly speaking'.[61] This extension, obsequious in its own way, provokes a break with Heidegger. Indeed, precisely where the time of the species (history) supposedly comes to an end, it demonstrates its marked independence from the mortality of the individual: 'when human Desire is fully and definitively satisfied. Then there is no more negating Action: Man is reconciled with the given World.'[62] The epilogue brings the genesis into relief. At the basis of historical praxis are unsatisfied desire, a considerable gap between subject and object (which implies the 'negating action' of labour), and the defective integration of *Homo sapiens* into the surrounding world. Not death, then, but rather the potentiality which is characteristic of the most penurious of living things, being devoid of any univocal environment or of any specialised instincts. This is a potentiality which, according to Kojève, found its complete and irreversible actuation in

60 Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la Lecture de Hegel*, Paris: Gallimard, 1968, p. 387. This passage appeared in Kojève's ninth lecture at the École des Hautes Études, which is not included in the truncated English translation of this volume published by Cornell University Press, cited hitherto.

61 Ibid., p. 388.

62 Ibid.

the French Revolution and the triumph of the industrial system. The *quid pro quo* afflicting this idea of a conclusive actuation has been discussed at length already, and it is not worth us getting into it here.[63] Rather more worthwhile is to ask ourselves what death there is, after the supposed collapse of history. 'Post-historical animals' continue perishing: yet for them, their demise is no longer a 'characteristic possibility' or mode of being, but merely the sentence handed down by biology. Post-history resembles Virgil's Hades: it is the abode of 'bodies with a human face, but devoid . . . of Time or creative potential':[64] bodies whose death is now precluded, even though they are still condemned to extinction. The thought experiment provoked by Kojève's thesis leads us to the conclusion that *if history faded away, this would spell the end of the time in which the fact that we must live for only a finite time is of great importance.*

But let us leave behind these meandering allusions, and make the point directly. The foundation of historicity is a permanent potential: a recurrent one, which can never be realised. If history were a *dynamis* liable to actuation, then far from evaporating at a certain point (as Kojève supposes), it would not even have begun. But, *contra* Heidegger, we must add: never-fulfilled potential has nothing to do with death. It has other names: the *perceptible context* of existence, that is, the world as the amorphous or vague matter which is 'all around us'; the generic *faculties* (capacity-to-speak, the disposition towards pleasure, labour-power, etc.) which, imitating its indeterminacy, allow us to operate within this perceptible

63 See above, Part I, section 7.
64 Kojève, *Introduction à la Lecture de Hegel*, p. 388.

context; and *time-as-a-whole*, which is never complete and never present, and within which each dateable presence plays out. If we were to use Heidegger's jargon – in fully polemical spirit – we might put it as follows. The perennially unrealised *dynamis* on which historicity depends does not regard the distress that isolates the individual, but rather the state of disorientation and indecision that unites a multitude; it does not nestle within what is 'only my own' but rather colours the experience shared by the 'public interpretative state'; it does not concern Da-sein's incomparable 'by itself', but rather the anonymous 'with' of that which is 'with-Da-sein'. Moreover, far from controlling the future, this *dynamis* is the common past of the whole human race. This is a non-chronological past, in a sense analogous to the original sin of Christian lore. Faculties, the world-context and time as a unitary whole are an 'already back then' which must be *remembered*, not a 'not yet' which we have to *anticipate*.

According to Heidegger, what distinguishes historical time is that it is essentially finite. This is indisputable. The real problem, however, consists in specifying precisely *what* is the limit that gives it this finite character. In order to get straight to the point, there is no harm in trying another mental experiment. Let us hypothesise a counterfactual situation, in which human life is ever-lasting. Once freed of the risk of death, would we suddenly lose our historical character? Perhaps not. Certainly not, indeed, if human life (even if it extended across the centuries) still bore the stigmata of potential, of non-actuality, of the not-now. He who avails himself of generic faculties and belongs to an indeterminate context *would be historical even if he were immortal*.

The limit characteristic of history is not its transient character. Rather, this limit is exactly the same thing as the unrealisability of potential. Note that the *dynamis*'s lack of completion should not be imputed to the absence or repeated postponement of the act (as in the case of death, this being only a dummy version of authentic *dynamis*). The decisive point, rather, is that even when acts relentlessly follow one after another, they can never adequately translate the potential to which they are correlated. There is a difference of nature, not degree, between the faculty and the corresponding executions: thus the former is never resolved by the latter. The sound of utterances does not banish, nor even blunt, the non-actuality of the capacity-to-speak: it persists right alongside them. Since the single instant itself entails the not-now of the unrealised potential, it, too, is incomplete, hollow, *unsaturated*. Thus the finite character of historical time coincides with the fact that even its smallest part has a *lacuna* inherent within its very structure. This lacuna is not some sort of ultimate annihilation (the end of life, the end of history), but rather an interstitial, ubiquitous void (the indelible not-now of the *dynamis*). Whereas death attests to the limit *to* the possible, the fact that each and every instant entails a *lacuna* instead indicates the limit inherent *within* the possible itself: that is, the limit arising *from* the relation between act and potential. It is only this second type of limit that characterises historical praxis.

Scholium. The interstitial void inherent within each lived moment thus constitutes the only basis for representing absolute annihilation, that is, the end of life. When we prefigure dying, we are disaggregating this historical moment, isolating its lacuna-filled element and

counterposing this to its saturated one. The proper image of death is that of a not-now irrevocably detached from the 'now', potential forever separated from the act. If we were to die, we would not be able to change anything: so the proper image of death is that of time as a unitary whole, standing in isolation from any position *in* time. Since-time-as-a-whole (not-now, potential) exists only in relation to a dateable presence ('now', act), in effect to represent the first in isolation from the second means indirectly to evoke the *catastrophe of time*. There is no other way of evoking it.

She who carries out an act is freed from the risk of a missing presence. She once again establishes her own position *in* time, avoiding being engulfed by the unformed potentialities of total time. She who carries out an act thwarts the threatening prospect of a not-now without a 'now'; and, in thwarting it, brings this prospect out into the open and gains mastery over it. But the not-now detached from the 'now' is the very image of death. Thus she who carries out an act is a *survivor*. The survivor retains an indelible *memory* of the ruin she has avoided. For her, the old adage *memento mori* ought to be read literally: she remembers death.

History's roots lie in a field wholly different from that of death. To note this is not, however, sufficient for grasping the decisive point. We need to take another step: only she who is leading a historical existence can fully be called mortal. Remember Kojève's 'post-historical animals', immersed in an actuality without pores or stretch-marks: they do still die, but they no longer maintain a constant relation with the eventuality of meeting their end. *Being-towards-death presupposes and depends upon history.*

There really is an intimate attachment between the two terms, but in the opposite sense to what Heidegger suggests. Dying takes the form of a permanent possibility *because* we are familiar with the always-unrealised potential (language-faculty, labour-power, etc.) which gives rise to history. The not-now inherent within single instants makes the eventual deadly end to their succession appear as a not-yet. The feeling of transience derives from a more fundamental melancholy, connected to the incompleteness, the lacuna, within all really-lived historical moments. To adopt a theological lexicon: it is the character of 'penultimate things' (history) that determines our experience and representation of 'ultimate things' (death), down to the smallest detail.

Part III
Historical Materialism

O gentlemen, the time of life is short . . .
An if we live, we live to tread on kings
William Shakespeare

Premise

The concept of labour-power, though it recurs in every turn of phrase throughout economic and sociological analysis, has itself hardly been thought about at all. Professional philosophers shrug their shoulders at the thought of doing so, and at most busy themselves with themes which are only its corollary (biopolitics, for example). And yet this concept, which is apparently self-evident and even superficial, is very much tangled up with our study of historical time.

The capitalist production relation is based on the difference between labour-power and effective labour. Labour-power is pure potential, very much different from the corresponding acts: 'When we speak of capacity for labour, we do not speak of labour, any more than when we speak of capacity for digestion, we speak of digestion.'[1] However, it is a potential with the very concrete prerogatives of a commodity; of a not-now which is subject to supply and demand. The capitalist buys the production *faculty* as such ('the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being', Marx writes[2]), and not one or several determinate performances of this faculty. After this purchase has taken place, the capitalist can employ the commodity which he now possesses as he pleases: 'The purchaser of labour-power consumes it by setting the seller of it to work. By working, the latter

1 Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, Chapter 6, at marxists.org.
2 Ibid.

becomes actually, what before he only was potentially.'[3] The really-supplied labour does not only reimburse the capitalist for the previous outlay of money – through which he obtained the other person's labour-power – but continues for a supplementary lapse of time: and here lies the genesis of surplus-value, the enigma of capitalist accumulation.

This synthesis is rather incomplete, certainly. No worry: its only purpose is immediately to demonstrate the *temporal paradox* that historical materialism has to get to the bottom of. We know that the discrepancy between act and potential, 'now' and not-now', presence and non-actuality, is the root of history in general. With capitalism, however, this discrepancy (in the detailed version of it provided by the labour-power/labour couple) attains extraordinary empirical, pragmatic and economic significance. In sum, it itself becomes a *historical fact*. We ought to conclude that capitalism is the epoch in which the condition of possibility of history appears in the guise of one phenomenon among others, even constituting the fulcrum of a specific mode of production; the epoch in which the *historicity* of experience can be experienced *historically*. The analogy with the Christian Revelation is striking: a presupposition which was at first hidden is now incarnated with tangible features, exposed to the most immediate perception. What appears with worldly, contingent features is not, it should be understood, anything atemporal, but precisely and only the *texture* of historical time, its hidden structure. This epiphany does not redeem: rather, the manner in which

3 Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, Chapter 7.

it takes place is the opposite of salvation. We have to bear a Revelation without a Messiah.

1. On the Concept of Labour-Power: Body and Potential

Capitalism is the first fully historical form of social organisation. Not only and not so much because it spells the ruin of every established tradition, fomenting the uninterrupted revolutionising of the processes of production and customs of life. But for a more radical reason. If we called the conditions that guarantee the history of any given event 'meta-historical', we could say that capitalism *historicises meta-history*, bringing it into the prosaic ambit of events and appropriating it for itself. Marx writes: 'capital presupposes: (1) the production process in general, such as is common to all social conditions, that is, without historic character . . . the production process in general comes to be modified historically as soon as it becomes merely an element of capital'.[4] We should take 'production in general' to mean: that which comprises the ensemble of real or possible labours. But this invariant and pervasive aspect is nothing other than the *faculty of labour*, a simple anthropological fact ('as is common to all social conditions'). Capitalism lays its claim to

4 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, Chapter 6, at marxists.org. Consider also his well-known consideration that 'Here, then, for the first time, the point of departure of modern economics, namely the abstraction of the category "labour", "labour as such", labour pure and simple, becomes true in practice. The simplest abstraction, then, which modern economics places at the head of its discussions, and which expresses an immeasurably ancient relation valid in all forms of society, nevertheless achieves practical truth as an abstraction only as a category of the most modern society.'

meta-historical production-in-general, conferring on it the rank of an empirical phenomenon for the first time, because its peculiar *historical* character (that which most separates it from the previous social systems) consists in reducing the generic production-potential to a commodity. Meta-history irrupts into ordinary history in the none-too-sublime guise of labour-power.

The buying and selling of the capacity-to-labour is an exchange between juridically equal subjects whose personal freedom is not in question. With no little sarcasm directed against those who accuse capitalism of undermining the rule of law, Marx observes: 'Equality and freedom are thus not only respected in exchange based on exchange values but, also, the exchange of exchange values is the productive, real basis of all *equality* and *freedom*.'[5] *But we need to look at the content of the transaction more closely. Unlike any other commodity*, 'The use value which the worker has to offer to the capitalist . . . is not materialized in a product, does not exist apart from him at all, thus exists not really, but only in potentiality, as his capacity.'[6] How does labour-power, something lacking in presence and which does 'not really exist', achieve the status of an inalienable use-value when exchanged for money? Potential becomes a good in itself only when it is radically separated from the correlated acts. The worker sells her labour-power because, without any means of production of her own, she cannot apply it by herself. If she were not a *free* citizen (if her whole person belonged, by law, to others), the proletarian would not be able to put a personal faculty like

5 Marx, *Grundrisse*, Chapter 5.
6 Ibid.

labour-power onto the market. But if she were not *expropriated* of all economic resources, she would have no reason to do so. Free and also expropriated: juridical independence goes hand-in-hand with material dependence.[7] Only the intersection of these two conditions makes it possible for potential to emerge in the world of appearances as the concrete stakes of an exchange, thus achieving its *parousia* or revelation.

Scholium. The incarnation of meta-history within the historically determinate capitalist production relation subverts and complicates any interpretation of temporality. Let us remind ourselves of a point we stressed in the second part of this book: potential, which by itself does

7 'This sphere that we are deserting [the sphere of circulation], within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labour-power goes on, is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, say of labour-power, are constrained only by their own free will. They contract as free agents, and the agreement they come to, is but the form in which they give legal expression to their common will. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own. And Bentham, because each looks only to himself. The only force that brings them together and puts them in relation with each other, is the selfishness, the gain and the private interests of each' (Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, Chapter 6). Passages of the kind abound in Marx. Their purpose is to crush in the egg the tendency to confuse capitalism for the *ancien régime* based on juridical dependence, and to demonstrate how the buying and selling of labour-power, far from violating the principles of the French Revolution, applies them with the greatest scruple. There is doubtless an excess of schematism here. Yann Moulier-Boutang's *Le salariat bridé* (Paris: PUF 1998) reconstructs in great detail capitalism's tendency to re-establish direct forms of dominion over labour-power. Personal subjection and juridical subalternity have never completely disappeared over the horizon.

not fall *in* time (being a persistent not-now), nonetheless does participate in the progression of chronology in virtue of its relation with the act, i.e. indirectly. *While* we utter a phrase or start labouring, the nexus that links these actions to their respective faculties – the capacity-to-speak and labour-power, respectively – comes to the surface; therefore, in that precise instant, and neither before nor after it, these faculties also find a place in the calendar. Conclusion: if we limit ourselves to considering the progression of time, potential is always *simultaneous* to the act. Yet in the epoch of capitalism, this is no longer wholly true. It is the exchange between money and labour-power that changes the situation: for this entails the insertion of potential *within* becoming, within the accounts, but independently of the act. The capacity-to-produce is bought and sold *before* the productive process has begun: 'The alienation of labour-power and its actual appropriation by the buyer, its employment as a use-value, are separated by an interval of time.'[8] The moment of alienation is the moment in which the not-now as such (and not thanks to its relation with an actuality) is wedged into empirical history. The separation between the date of the exchange, which concerns the faculty of labour, and the date of the really executed labour, corroborates our initial assertion: namely, that the heterogeneity of act and potential not only gives rise to history but ultimately emerges as a specific historical fact.

At first blush, capital appears as an enormous deposit of *objectified labour*, executed some time previously and turned into exchange-value. The only thing different to it (and able to increase it) is the worker: 'non-objectified

8 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, Chapter 6.

labour, labour which is still objectifying itself, labour as subjectivity'.[9] Non-objectified labour, the mere faculty of producing, is however 'a capacity of his bodily existence; has no existence apart from that'.[10] Every time it tries to procure labour-power, capital comes up against a living body. This latter does not, in itself, count for anything from an economic point of view, but it is necessary in that it is the temple of what really matters: 'labour as subjectivity'. The living body, pillaged of every one of its qualities except pure vitality itself, becomes the *substratum* of productive capacity, the tangible *sign* of potential, the objective *semblance* of non-objectified labour. If money is the universal representation of exchange-values, then *life* is the extrinsic equivalent of the only use-value that 'is not materialized in a product'.

The far from mythological origin of that mechanism of knowledges and powers which Michel Foucault termed *biopolitics*[11] should undoubtedly be sought out within the mode of existence of labour-power. The practical importance which potential assumes *qua* potential within the capitalist mode of production; its inseparability from immediate 'bodily existence' – this and only this is the foundation of the biopolitical perspective. Foucault thumbs his nose at those libertarian theorists (Wilhelm Reich, for example) according to whom spasmodic attention to life is the fruit of a repressive intent: to discipline bodies in order to increase labour productivity. Foucault

9 Marx, *Grundrisse*, Chapter 5.

10 Ibid.

11 See in particular Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics, Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, New York: Picador 2010, and his *On the Government of the Living* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2014).

is very much in the right, but is here up against an easy opposition. The governance of life runs from the containment of impulses to the most boundless licence, from pedantic forbidding to the heights of tolerance, from ghettoes for the poor to Keynesian high salaries, from the maximum security prison to the welfare state. That said, the crucial question remains: *why* is life as such taken care of, governed? The answer is straightforward: because it serves as the *substratum* for a faculty, labour-power, which has the autonomous significance of a use-value. What is at issue here is not the productivity of actual labour, but the exchangeability of the potential to labour itself. Simply on account of being bought and sold, this potential also calls into question the breeding-ground from which it is inseparable: the living body; moreover, it puts the body on display wholly as an object of knowledge and governance (of countless different governing strategies). It goes without saying that life, considered as a generic substratum of potential, is an amorphous life, reduced to a few essential, *meta-historical* traits. Biopolitics is a particular derivative aspect of the inscription of *meta-history* within the field of empirical phenomena; an inscription, as we already know, that distinguishes capitalism *historically*.

The inseparability of the potential to produce from the living body also helps explain the inglorious mystery of the *wage* (the true apex of biopolitics, indeed). To those who claim that wages are a question for trade unionists and not philosophers, we can only reply that on the basis of such a criterion Heidegger would have to be considered a chemicals expert simply because he often concerned himself with technology. But let us get to the point. In offering the wage, the capitalist wants to

buy labour-power, or 'labour as subjectivity', and not the living body itself. A worker's life – unlike that of the slave – has no price-tag: 'As a slave, the worker has *exchange value*, a value; as a free wage-worker he has *no value*; it is rather his power of disposing of his labour, effected by exchange with him, which has value.'[12] Potential and life are made of the same substance, but are not identical: to put a price on the former goes hand-in-hand with devaluing the latter. But how is the exchange-value of potential determined? On the basis of what parameters is the wage determined?

There is a difficulty here. Objectified labour, which the capitalist possesses in the form of money, *is not* commensurable with non-objectified labour, with the faculty to labour as such. This, for the very same reasons that in general forbid any equivalence being drawn between a series of completed acts and a potential (not-now): while acts play out in time and can be broken down into parts, potential cannot be, and is devoid of chronological location. Thus in order to establish the price of labour-power, we need a *middle term* that allows a comparison and exchange of the two heterogeneous poles (money and 'labour as subjectivity'), a term which has points of contact with each of them. This middle term is, in fact, amorphous and unqualified *life*, 'immediate bodily existence'. Like objectified labour, the living body is something *actual*; or better, it is a product whose costs (means of subsistence, costs of education and training, etc.) amount to determinate quantities of objectified labour. On the other hand, the living body is inseparable from potential, a fact that constitutes its substratum. The price of

12 Marx, *Grundrisse*, Chapter 5.

labour-power, the wage, conforms to this middle term. In order to obtain the only good that will satisfy his appetite – potential – the capitalist offers remuneration corresponding to the maintenance of that which does not, conversely, have value: life.[13] Even though it is exempt from exchange (or for this very reason), the substratum *life* provides the *unit of measurement* for exchange itself.

Let us repeat. The buying and selling of labour-power attests to the fact that meta-history has established itself within the very heart of contemporary history. The division between potential and act, the hidden cornerstone of historical praxis, assumes unprecedented prominence when potential appears in and by itself – separated from the act – as the eminent content of an economic transaction. That is, when the not-now takes on the modest aspect of something that is at our fingertips, once its use-value and exchange-value are recognised. Before we go any further, it is worth making another clarification. We need to understand clearly – to the letter – Marx's definition of labour-power: 'the sum of all the physical and intellectual aptitudes existent in corporeality'. *All of them*, note. In speaking of labour-power, we implicitly refer to any sort of faculty: linguistic competence, memory, the capacity-to-think and so on. 'Labour-power' does not indicate a circumscribed potential, but is rather the name *common* to the various different types of

13 'In general terms, the exchange value of [the worker's] commodity cannot be determined by the manner in which its buyer uses it, but only by the amount of objectified labour contained in it; hence, here, by the amount of labour required to reproduce the worker himself. For the use value which he offers exists only as an ability, a capacity [*Vermögen*] of his bodily existence; has no existence apart from that' (Marx, *Grundrisse*, Chapter 5).

potential; or better, the name suitable for them in so far as they are relevant to production and appear as 'non-objectified labour'. To the exact extent that the various faculties are part of labour-power, they share in its destiny: they impose themselves with the peremptoriness of an empirical fact. An example: the capacity-to-speak, as such – as distinct from any speech act – appears as a concrete object of experience in so far as it is involved in the exchange between money and the 'sum of all the worker's aptitudes'. And the same goes for the capacity-to-remember or the capacity-to-think. In summary: the concept of labour-power points to both the eventual orientation of the faculties towards production, and their worldly epiphany.[14]

It is now worth asking ourselves in what forms the practical revelation of potential takes place also within the production process properly speaking (that which follows the buying and selling of the capacity to produce). I would here like to sketch out – if only in draft form – the following thesis: at the culmination of capitalist

14 The different faculties are correlated amongst themselves according to a changeable set of hierarchical relations. Each time we change our perspective (the question that orients the study) a specific figure of *dynamis* emerges in the front rank, prevailing over the others. When it was a matter of shining a light on the concept of potential itself, pointing out the hiatus that separates it from that of 'potential acts', it was the *language faculty* that took centre stage (see above, Part II, section 4). Subsequently, when we asked ourselves about the means by which we can be cognisant of *dynamis*, it was the *memory*'s turn to take a pre-eminent role, this being the faculty that provides an access-route to all the others (see above, Part II, section 8). Now, instead, what is at issue is the historical-empirical manifestation of potential. The hegemon, in this last perspective, is *labour-power*. If the other faculties also come to have immediate phenomenal relevance (as such, and not in virtue of their application) it is because they contribute to constituting the capacity to produce.

development, *actual* labour consists of the exhibition (more than the application) of the *potential* to labour: the real execution imitates the faculty's mode of existence, rather than being separated from it; the structural characteristics of labour-power (latency, inseparability from the worker's living body, etc.) infect the specific operations through which it is explicated. Let us pass over the middle stages of labouring acts' *imitatio potentiae* (though it would be interesting to re-examine the very notion of 'abstract labour' from such a perspective). The present-day situation will suffice, and serves to illustrate this thesis.

Delineating a historical tendency which today seems to have been realised down to the last detail, Marx wrote that: 'Labour no longer appears so much to be included within the production process; rather, the human being comes to relate more as watchman and regulator to the production process itself . . . He steps to the side of the production process instead of being its chief actor.'[15] He who limits himself to standing at the side of the production cycle, adopting the role of watchman and regulator, alternates single performances with a state of vigilant inaction. During the working day, he remains a mere potential across long intervals: unapplied, yet available all the same. The labour performed preserves – precisely as it is being performed – the characteristics of 'non-objectified labour'. That is, it maintains the physiognomy of labour-power. The worker's exertion is to be found in the oscillation – promptly and with the right timing – from the not-now of the faculty to the 'now' of the execution. This is an activity which each time expresses

15 Marx, *Grundrisse*, Chapter 14.

and articulates anew the *difference* between potential and act. There is more. You will remember that labour-power is a use-value that is 'not materialised in a product', and does not exist outside of the 'living subject' in which it inheres. Yet this prerogative of potential is reversed in the production process, and comes to characterise also the modalities and results of the labour that is being performed. As a watchman and regulator, the worker does not fashion an object external to himself, but rather carries out *linguistic* actions that are an end in themselves.[16] In at least one aspect, production based on language resembles the virtuoso interpretations performed by a pianist or an actor: the lack of an enduring final product implies that the use-value of the labour provided is never separable from the person who executed it.[17] Just like the use-value of labour-power, indeed.

Capitalism is the first fully historical form of social organisation. But it is also the only one that has been able

16 On the essentially linguistic character of contemporary labour – also known as 'post-Fordist' labour – I refer the reader to my *Convenzione e materialism: L'unicità senza aura* (Rome: Theoria 1986), particularly its sixth chapter. On the complete juxtaposition of material production and linguistic communication, see the now-classic text *Il posto dei calzini: La svolta linguistica dell'economia e i suoi effetti nella politica* (Bellinzona: Casagrande 1994) by Christian Mazzini. He followed this work with *E il denaro va* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri 1998) which establishes a solid connection between the new figures of money and the productivity of labour based on communication. On post-Fordism in general – and how Marx can be used to explain the transformations of the late twentieth century—we could cite a number of Antenio Negri's works, but will limit ourselves to mentioning his *Marx beyond Marx* and (together with Michael Hardt) *Labor of Dionysus*.

17 I have elsewhere tried to provide an extensive account of the structural analogy between the virtuoso artistic performances and post-Fordist labour: 'Virtuosismo e rivoluzione: La teoria politica dell'esodo' in *Mondanità* (Rome: Manifestolibri 1994).

to pass itself off, from the outset and ever anew, as the *end of History*. This is not only a case of its apologists being immoderately zealous. History appears to have stopped on account of the same event that has in other senses unleashed it in unprecedented measure: the explicit, almost tangible, or even trivial, manifestation of the presuppositions on which the historicity of experience depends. When these presuppositions stick out right in front of us, with the same obviousness as a civil war or financial crisis, we can believe well enough that they have exhausted their function: is it not, after all, true that only the dried-up root comes to the surface? The Revelation is exchanged for an Epilogue. The conditions of possibility of history are taken for given facts; but, and this is the point, they are taken for *permanent* given facts, recurrent and *ahistorical* ones. Capitalism, for which the conditions of possibility of history become a productive resource, thus seems to represent only certain *invariant* elements of human praxis. The society that appeals to 'production in general' (and literally profits from the fundamental difference between potential and act) keenly boasts its post-historical pedigree.

Marx reproaches political economy for a far from innocent misinterpretation: that of representing the capitalist production relation, which is unmistakeably a 'historic result', as history's 'point of departure'.[18] And right he is. But we must add: this malicious misreading is fed by the fact that the 'historic result' in question has the singular prerogative of really mobilising history-in-general's 'point of departure' – its fundamental presuppositions – in its own favour. When capitalism appropriates an anthropological requisite like the potential to produce, the accent can fall

18 Marx, *Grundrisse*, Chapter 1.

either on the contextualised ways in which the appropriation takes place, or on the indeterminate character of this requisite, pertaining to any epoch or society. The second emphasis points to the 'bourgeois narrow-mindedness, which regards the capitalist forms of production as absolute forms – hence as eternal, natural forms of production'.[19] It is the concept of labour-power that explains the spread of a state of mind (little matter whether it be melancholic or euphoric) inspired by the 'end of History'. Or better: it forces us to recognise that this end is, yes, an appearance, but a necessary appearance encapsulated within the dominant mode of production, and sometimes corroborated by the very processes that might also serve to deny it.

The following paragraphs are limited to articulating what we have just said with regard to labour-power's mode of existence. They are dedicated to two crucial themes of historical materialism: religious ritual and pre-history.

2. 'In illo tempore': The Ambivalence of Religious Symbols

Usually the materialist prefers to give meta-history a wide berth. But in doing so she renounces in advance her most ambitious and delicate task: grasping the *material* aspect of meta-history itself, the changing forms in which it emerges practically in the course of time: in sum, its *historical* destiny. And she risks also giving a wide berth to an adequate understanding of capitalism.

In pre-capitalist societies, meta-history had an external, concrete expression in religious worship. We should at

19 Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, 1861–3, Addenda 12(B), at marxists.org.

once note a difference of great significance. While capitalism *integrates* meta-history into social and economic history, not leaving any residues and to the point of making the two planes indistinguishable, religion *counterposes* meta-history to historical facts, assigning it a special, separate sphere: the sacred time in which becoming is suspended or negated. And yet the full integration of history and meta-history can only be wholly deciphered in light of their prior counterposition. The true precursor of the capitalist mode of production is not so much another mode of production (serf labour on feudal estates, for example), as the complex of beliefs, mythical-ritual symbols and collective practices that go under the name 'religion'. Historical materialism sometimes falls short of its principle discovery, the concept of labour-power, because it is almost never materialist enough to understand the significance of religious experience in all its depth.

Sacred time is a representation of the *genesis* and *foundation* of historical time: and for this reason it goes beyond and lies outside it. And only for this reason, note. The representation of that which has made history possible does not sit within the usual catalogue of historical events, but refers, instead, to an 'other-then' which is the substratum of chronology. The origin of the cosmos, of life, of becoming, is situated in an indefinite past: *in illo tempore*. Liturgy connects the actual situation to the absolute beginning of all things. Ernesto de Martino writes that 'Ritual is the behaviour that refers the historical "this time" ever back to the meta-historical "one time", which is also a "once and for all time".'[20] The

20 Ernesto de Martino, *La fine del mondo*, Turin: Einaudi 1977 p. 378.

endeavour which is now underway draws legitimacy and value from its enduring, intimate link to a mythical not-now, a prior state to which is attributed the invariance of an archetype. According to Mircea Eliade, 'the act takes on meaning and reality only to the extent that it reprises a primordial activity'.[21] It draws meaning, that is, if it renounces any contingent singularity of its own and shows that it is a *repeat performance*.

The relation between the historical 'this time' and the meta-historical 'once and for all' is a representation of the relation between act and potential. The origin is chaos, still-indeterminate *dynamis*: '*In illo tempore*, in the mythical epoch, everything was possible. Then, types were not fixed and forms remained fluid . . . Moreover, fluidity of forms was also a symptom of the *eschaton* at the other extremity of time, from the moment in which history ended and the whole world began to live in a sacred time, in eternity.'[22] But the image of *illud tempus* as fluctuating potentiality does not provide any basis for the present activity. Chaos is inimitable. For this reason, in religious worship, potential is supplanted by a surreptitious and yet useable double: the *inaugural act*, the progenitor of a series (the first hunt, the first sacrifice, the first sexual coupling, realised *in illo tempore* by demi-gods or heroes). *Dynamis*, which remains the same as it relates to each single act, takes on the misleading guise of an immutable, ancestral act; it becomes a normative model, which must be ritually repeated in order to avoid the uncertainty and dangers that attend the historical 'this time'. The

21 Mircea Eliade, *Le mythe de l'éternel retour*, Paris: Gallimard 1969, p. 16.

22 Mircea Eliade, *Traité d'histoire des religions*, Paris: Payot 1996, p. 331.

reduction of potential to a repeatable prototype is the cornerstone of those doctrines that postulate the cyclical nature of time (the eternal return of the same thing, the periodic regeneration of the cosmos, etc.).

The mystical-ritual representation of the *genesis* and *foundation* of history is directed against history itself, against the proliferation or metastasis of its concrete contents. And this is the decisive point: the liturgical image that refutes or paralyses becoming is the very thing that allows for it. The repetition of the archetype, of an inaugural act accomplished *in illo tempore*, interrupts the succession of chronology: a series of unique (historical) events is replaced with a reversible series of identical events (copies conforming to the meta-historical model). Eliade: 'time is abolished through the imitation of archetypes and the repetition of paradigmatic acts'.[23] De Martino:

> The dehistoricisation of a critical moment of existence is, first of all, the 'myth' of that moment. Secondly, it is the possibility of repeating this myth every time that this determinate moment presents itself; that is, 'ritual'. An organic system of mythical-ritual dehistoricisations, comprising the critical recurrent moments of a certain regime of existence, forms a religion.[24]

Gerard van der Leeuw speaks of 'Birth, Marriage, and Death: Life as it directs itself to Power and is seized upon by Power; therefore not the personal life of feeling, not

23 Eliade, *Le mythe*, p. 49.

24 Ernesto de Martino, *Storia e metastoria*, Lecce: Argo 1995, p. 123.

the life of thought, but simply Life in its stark nakedness . . . Actually, even birth, marriage and death are still too ample. Birth and death suffice . . . As over against Power there is no history, neither collective nor individual.'[25] Which is to say: the life of which van der Leeuw speaks, dehistoricised because it is invested with sacred potential, is wholly analogous to the 'immediate bodily existence' which under capitalism functions as the characteristic or substratum of labour-power (potential turned into a commodity).

The clash between Eliade's and de Martino's ways of understanding the religious impulse to abrogate history is of great interest. For Eliade, the irreversibility of becoming is a 'secondary' – indeed, pathological – characteristic of experience; its primary – constant and unavoidable – characteristic is its negation. The sacred is a direct expression of this anti-historical impulse, this vocation to see off the pestering of the 'ever new'.[26] The sacred is primary, then: it does not submit to explanation on the basis of extrinsic elements (and still less on the basis of the same historical vicissitudes that it itself suspends and emasculates). De Martino objects: 'Eliade says that man is opposed to history even when he claims to be nothing

25 Gerard van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation: A Study in Phenomenology*, New York: Harper & Row 1963, p. 192. In the Italian translation the word 'Power' is rendered as 'potential'.

26 See Eliade, *Le mythe*, Chapters 4 and 5, and also his *Le sacré et la profane*, Paris: Gallimard 1997, Chapter 4. According to Eliade, the impulse to defend oneself from history prevails even at the heart of mature capitalism: 'It is possible that we could see a desperate attempt to forbid historical events through the reintegration of human societies into the horizon of archetypes and their repetition (an artificial horizon, because established by convention). In other words, we could conceive of a not-too-distant epoch in which humanity would be forced to renounce "making history" in order to ensure its own survival' (*Le mythe*, p. 172).

but history. But note, we could also say the opposite, that man is part of history even when he claims to go beyond it with his mythical-ritual behaviour.'[27] Eliade stops short in deference to the meta-historical character of religion, holding it to be unquestionable. De Martino, conversely, proposes to demonstrate the genuinely historical reality and significance of meta-history; or better still, the nature of its unexpected *historicising* function. Crude materialism is closer to Eliade than to de Martino. Indeed, Eliade, too, sees in religious worship *only* an escape from history. It is a justifiable, genuine escape, in Eliade's view – a pusillanimous, illusory one in the view of our perfunctory materialists. But what is the difference? In both cases, practice is stashed in the archives, ruling that there are no grounds to proceed. In both cases, the salient question is left unaddressed. The mythical-ritual symbols responsible for the re-evocation of origin and archetypes represent the conditions of possibility of concrete historical praxis. As such, these symbols are always correlated to this praxis, even though opposed to it; indeed, they are at its very centre. Thus their opposition emerges on account of their excessive proximity, and not from an insurmountable separation. And it does not seem plausible that we are here dealing *only* with an opposition.

It was de Martino (and not Löwith, Taubes, or anyone else) who delineated a radically new situation in terms of the thinking on historical time. However, for our purposes it suffices to make a summary reference to a thesis that frequently recurred throughout his works. For de Martino, mystical-ritual meta-history is *ambivalent*: that is, it fulfils two roles which seem mutually contradictory.

27 De Martino, *La fine del mondo*, p. 268.

If on the one hand it dehistoricises, offering protection from 'the uncontrolled proliferation of becoming', on the other it nonetheless provides a 'means of reprising and redeeming historical experience'.[28] The liturgy veils the variety of contingent actions that follow one another in time, reducing them to certain immutable archetypes; yet precisely for this reason, it allows for a trauma-free multiplication of these same actions. 'All religions are born of that experience of the present which does not hold firm in the face of history (anguishes over history), and they constitute a means of *opening the way to history through the mediation of dehistoricisation*: religions are systems of dehistoricising the critical moments of existence, such that presence might emerge from them unscathed.'[29] The ritual interruption of chronological progression affords the opportunity to 'stand within history *as if* we were not doing so'.[30] The escape-tunnel is also an access-route: in simulating stopping and retraction, we ready ourselves for a new beginning; the apotropaic 'as if' rekindles our 'profane industry' anew.

It is worth adding a marginal commentary on de Martino's analysis. The mythical-ritual symbol does not wholly coincide with the ambivalent role it plays. That is, it is insufficient to define it as the mechanism that discredits *and* rehabilitates historical experience in one fell swoop. This symbol is, first of all, an image of the *genesis* and *foundation* of history. Its ambivalence sinks its roots in this representative content. When history's genesis and foundation are portrayed in religious worship, they seem

28 Ibid., p. 219.

29 De Martino, *Storia e metastoria*, p.129. Italics added.

30 De Martino, *La fine del mondo*, p. 222. This phrase is a *topos* of his, recurring throughout his posthumous texts.

to reabsorb the multiple historical occurrences to which they have given rise; thus tending to kill their own offspring. On the other hand, the liturgical representation itself proves that the genesis and foundation are still at work, omnipresent and contiguous to each single action; there is no moment of chronological succession in which history is not restarting afresh.

The limitation of religious worship does not, of course, lie in its according considerable significance to meta-history, but in the fact that it accords it *too little*. The defect of the mystical-symbolic ritual is not that it hopes to represent the presuppositions of historical praxis, but that it hopes *only* to represent them. Being itself encapsulated within historical time, meta-history does, indeed, achieve a sort of external existence, but it is a partial, circumscribed, extremely modest one. It would be a grave error to believe that capitalism is anti-religious because it rejects meta-history; on the contrary, it is anti-religious because it extends meta-history far beyond the confines set down by liturgy, guaranteeing it the full brilliance that befits a productive force. Capitalism realises in practice that which de Martino himself poses as an object of study: namely, to *historicise meta-history*. It amalgamates and unites the two poles which religion separates out; *illud tempus* is no longer counterposed to becoming, but becomes an indelible component of it; shards of sacred time are sunk in every fold or interstice of historical time; meta-history, far from having to be evoked with reflected images, emerges at surface-level with the irrefutable evidence of concrete phenomena.[31]

31 Consider the primacy of structure (the relations of production) over superstructure (law, politics, religion, etc.). Rarely has a thesis attracted such opprobrium – and for very good reasons. The only way to defend it is oblique and paradoxical. It is necessary to limit its field of

The capitalist mode of production is pervaded, from top to bottom, by the *ambivalence* typical of the mythical-ritual symbol. The oscillation between history stopping and its being unleashed in intensified form is not represented by some special aspect of worship, but rather takes root everywhere, characterising the entire organisation of society. Two antithetical states of mind alternate – or more often, accompany one another – each of them emitting its own organ-grinder's tune. It is said that in capitalism, the pace of time is accelerated, all that is solid hurries to melt into air, and the only reasonable thing to expect is the surprise of the unpredictable. But it is also said that in capitalism time is turned to stone, the vortex of change cannot hide the monotonous repetition of unalterable archetypes, and that everyday surprises are trite and all too well known to us.

The ambivalence no longer appears in a symbolic representation, but in the material reality of labour-power. We know that the faculty for production, 'labour as subjectivity', lends itself to a dual interpretation: as a category

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application: *only* in capitalism does the economic 'structure' enjoy a bare pre-eminence. Why? Because *only* in capitalism does the production relation itself count meta-history (the requisites for historicising experience in general) among its material factors. From this it follows, however, that the capitalist 'structure' can be fully understood only with maximum consideration of the most ethereal aspect of 'superstructure': namely, the religious tradition within which meta-history has long found expression. In the *German Ideology* (Part 1, B, at marxists.org), Marx made a comment which, although resulting from incontestable polemical requirements, really jars when taken by itself: 'While the French and the English at least hold by the political illusion, which is moderately close to reality, the Germans move in the realm of the "pure spirit", and make religious illusion the driving force of history.' So in reference to mature capitalism we ought to say, instead, that it is the religious illusion, and not the political one, that comes closer to the reality of the mode of production – to the 'structure'.

peculiar to capitalist society, and as an anthropological requisite inherent within any epoch. The whole difficulty lies in understanding that capitalism is an absolutely *specific* socio-economic formation precisely because it gives the most *generic* anthropological requisites an empirical appearance; because it makes potential as such into a use-value that can be alienated in exchange for money. Labour-power, by itself, nonetheless produces a *trompe l'oeil* effect: it seems to be a considerable 'historic result' but also the 'point of departure of history'; something unprecedented, but also an archetype that is valid for all time. Meta-history is materialised in a historically definite situation: yet this true-enough statement is never immune to the risk of being turned upside-down by the loose talk that provides its mirror-image, according to which it is instead history that breaks up into an ensemble of meta-historical relations.

In passing from the mythical-ritual symbol to the buying and selling of labour-power, the ambivalence changes in both appearance and function. Religion *veils* and suspends history through the liturgical representation of its origin: but, in so doing, makes it bearable and allows for its resumption. On the contrary, capitalism *exhibits* the historicity of experience in clear figures, on the terrain of phenomena; but, in so doing, it seems to exhaust this historicity once and for all time. Dehistoricisation is not some middle stage, but its end result. The ambivalence is no longer a therapeutic parenthesis, but the *permanent* (and pathological) consequence of a history so heavily populated that it can count among its immediate contents no less than the genesis and foundation of all historical praxis.

In capitalism, we cannot 'stand within history *as if* we

were not doing so'. For one clear reason: meta-history, which had previously provided us with an escape-tunnel (the *as if*) is now an integral part of that history which we were hypothetically meant to be escaping. What we can do, in recompense, is believe that the hustle and bustle of history has now come to an end, in its entirety. Capitalism understands itself to be the *eschaton*, the conclusion, the end of time. But with one important qualification: it is not an *eschaton* to be prefigured and awaited. The end has *already* crept up on us: without any clamour, and, above all, without any Judgment. As de Martino puts it: 'We experience a fulfilled prophecy, rather than awaiting it. Contemporary apocalyptics (or eschatology) do not have to defend themselves on account of unrealised predictions, but rather have to manage living with their own success.'[32]

3. Contemporary pre-history

Pre-history is, by definition, a past that escapes any chronology. If we sought to identify it with any epoch, however remote, we would only ever grasp an uncertain, poorly documented and fragmentary history. But nothing truly *pre*-historical. The attempt to situate the absolute past, pre-history, within the course of time, leads to a *regression ad infinitum*. As long as I can say that something happened, and when, I am talking about a historical period; to get a grip on pre-history, I must, then, refer back to a previous period; but this one, too, has a 'something' and a 'when'; so I must keep going ever further

32 De Martino, *La fine del mondo*, p. 335.

back; yet every fresh effort results in yet another checkmate. Indeed, the concept of pre-history has something in common with the original *illud tempus* re-evoked by the mythical-ritual symbol. In both cases, there is no help to be found in the calendar. The anteriority of pre-history, just like that of the *illud tempus*, does not concern a myriad of particular events; rather, it is the anteriority that we usually attribute to an *a priori* condition, a fundamental mode of existence, an immovable background.

So let us turn to a thesis that we caught a glimpse of in the second part of the book. Pre-history coincides with the situation of *disorientation* and *indecision* in which we find the living body that does not dispose of a pre-fixed and immutable environment. This original situation is constantly attested to anew by our possession of generic *faculties* (linguistic competence, labour-power, memory, etc.): these make up for our lack of specialised instincts, opposing their own plasticity to the indeterminacy of life's context. Faculties, the different types of potential, relentlessly reaffirm the uncertainty and the lacunae inherent within disoriented existence: preliminary or *archaic* uncertainty and lacunae, which precede any act or action we undertake.

There is no potential that is not, in itself, pre-historic. And vice versa: there is no discourse on the primordial that does not concern potential. It suffices, here, to remember that the only philosophical reconnaissance of pre-history was the study of the *origin of language*, developed with extraordinary intensity during the last decades of the eighteenth century. It goes without saying that the 'origin' in question does not consist of certain rudimentary phrases uttered at the dawn of time, but is wholly the same as the *faculty* to articulate any phrase, with the simple

capacity-to-speak. Occupying themselves with this faculty or potential, Rousseau, Maupertuis, Hamann and especially Herder became the chroniclers of an incalculable past which seems to precede any historical event, exegetists of the *illud tempus* in which 'everything was possible . . . types were not fixed and forms remained fluid'.

Scholium. The intimate link between pre-history and the origin of language is also apparent from Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. Here he affirms that there are historical facts only where there is a historiography up to the task of narrating them; and there is only historiography where there is the state.[33] For Hegel, life before the state is pre-historic life. But what is it that characterises the long wait for the state, the period prior to history properly speaking? Hegel repeatedly gives the same direct response: 'the extension and organic growth of the empire of articulate sounds'.[34] The *incipit* of language – its coming into being – is pre-historic. The discovery of Sanskrit 'as of a new world'[35] both brings us a little closer to the framework of all languages and casts light on populations whose 'tradition reaches beyond the record of the founding of the State'.[36] Yet this does not take us away from the fact that the origins of language itself 'remain involved in the obscurity of a voiceless past',[37] that however variegated and tumultuous, the experiences of pre-state peoples have not 'given rise to History'.

33 G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, §69 et sqq, at marxists.org.
34 Ibid., §70.
35 Ibid., §69.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., §70.

The 'precociousness' of language with regard to the state, which Hegel insistently emphasises in his *Philosophy of History*, is explored in detail in the first chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in his discussion of that 'sensible consciousness' which limits itself to using a handful of pronouns and deictic adverbs: 'this', 'I', 'now', 'here'. According to Hegel, these only apparently ingenuous words fully demonstrate the theoretical refinement of language, or its 'divine nature'. As we know, the 'sensible consciousness' is still ignorant of ethical-political relations, the fight for recognition, mastery and servitude. It impersonates only 'the extension and organic growth of the empire of articulate sounds': language without the state, prior to the state. The first chapter of the *Phenomenology* is, among other things, a *treatise on pre-history*.

Pre-history is an essential, unavoidable aspect of *any* lived moment. The preliminary situation of disorientation and uncertainty, connected to the lack of any unvarying environmental niche, never fails to make itself felt. Moreover, it establishes – even in its own time – the fact that each single *historical moment* is composed of two elements, which are indistinguishable but heterogeneous: one saturated and one with lacunae, the 'now' and the not-now, the act and the potential. The lacuna-filled (unrealised, potential) inlay of the *historical moment* is, indeed, pre-history. If the reader will indulge a paradoxical formula, we might say that the historicity of experience postulates the permanence of pre-history within history. And vice versa: *the idea of an 'end of History'* derives from the apparent liquidation or overcoming of pre-history. A wholly saturated series of actions and passions, one that

is thus free of the disorientation of old, would not have any historical tonality, but would fully converge with the 'becoming an animal again' whose advent Kojève once heralded.

Labour-power incarnates the *illud tempus* that cannot be located in the calendar, the pre-historic side of human praxis. There should be no astonishment on account of this formulation. Like all other faculties, the capacity to labour amounts to a *non-chronological past*. As we know, potential is the dateless 'back then' which accompanies each 'now', the incomputable anteriority against which any presence stands out, the indefinite 'before' with respect to which the act always appears as an 'after'. But labour-power, unlike all the other faculties, also enjoys an indisputable empirical prominence: a use-value which is bought and sold, the cornerstone of capitalist accumulation. So it is precisely and only labour-power that makes the non-chronological past carnal and external; that makes the *illud tempus* play an authoritative role in modern political economy; that gives an immediate social significance to the pre-historic lack of specialised instincts. The nebulous 'other then' (which does not correspond to any specific epoch) in which the philosophers of the eighteenth century located the origin of language is materialised in capitalism with the physiognomic traits of labour-power.

The capitalist mode of production joins together three different temporal dimensions: a) the labour carried out months or years before, crystallised in money, or rather in monetary capital; b) the potential to labour, that is, the pre-historic *illud tempus*; c) the labour that is actually underway, which appertains to the 'now'. In the exchange between money and labour-power two radically dissimilar

'nows' are at play, one of them dateable (the already-objectified labour, combining to form capital) and the other extraneous to chronology (the faculty as such). It is not the past and present that meet on the market, as Marx himself sometimes suggests,[38] but rather two *different types of past*. The labour that is actually underway, the only labour that merits being considered *present*, will make its appearance only later, within the production process. However, that which follows the exchange conceals the terms of the question. The two 'nows', which are at first counterposed, overlap until they become just one. When the buying and selling are over, no trace of labour-power remains. Objectified labour – capital – intersects and absorbs 'labour as subjectivity'. The chronological past (the sum of previous actualities) latches onto the non-chronological past (pre-historic potential), assimilates it to itself, imposes its own features on it, and becomes its legitimate representative. Behind the labour now underway (the present) there seems only to be a chain of already-accomplished labours, only the 'dead labour' concentrated in the hands of the capitalist; the other antecedent, the *faculty* for production, seems to

38 For example, '*objectified* labour, i.e. labour which is *present in space*, can also be opposed, as *past labour*, to labour which is *present in time*. If it is to be present in time, alive, then it can be present only as the *living subject*, in which it exists as capacity, as possibility' (Marx, *Grundrisse*, Chapter 5). Objectified labour is past labour; no doubt, on this score. But can it really be opposed to something present. According to Marx, it is 'living labour' which is present; yet at the moment of exchange, this latter 'exists as capacity, as possibility'. And the mere capacity for labour is not at all the same thing as an actual labour that is really underway. Labour is (still) not present, but the 'immediate bodily existence' of the worker, or life as the substratum of labour-power, is. We might say, in jest, that at the moment of exchange the adjective of 'living labour' is present, but not (yet) the noun . . .

have been wiped from the horizon. The explicit manifestation of the *illud tempus* is overturned as it is eclipsed. It is here (or also here, at least) that the semblance that pre-history has been definitively overcome lays its roots. And the presumed liquidation of pre-history, as we have seen, leads to the belief that History itself has reached the end of the line.

The historical materialist recognises that the true emblem of capitalism, from the temporal perspective, is the *contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous*. But she gives this expression an extremely radical meaning: the equally concrete, non-contemporaneous moments that coexist in the capitalist mode of production are pre-history and actuality, the *illud tempus* and the present that is now underway. The lacuna-filled element of the lived instant (the age-old lack of a pre-fixed environment) emerges in social and economic relations *right alongside* its saturated element (fully determinate actions). However, it does not cease to be what it is (potential, lacuna-filled) merely on account of having obtained an external, practical aspect. The materialist knows that the empirical incarnation of pre-history does not imply that it has been overcome, but, on the contrary, demonstrates its persistence. The materialist, then, takes seriously the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous. And within this, she sees a point of no return. It has become simply impossible to conceive of a historical praxis that does not have to engage closely with the enduring interconnection between pre-history and actuality (that is, with the condition that makes history itself possible). Needless to say, this is all the more true for any praxis that seeks to establish an intransigent critique of capitalism.

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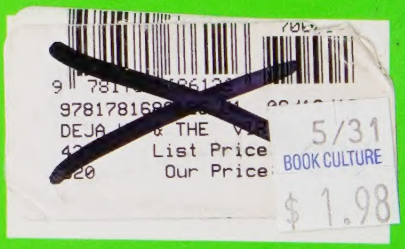
Paolo Virno teaches Philosophy at the University of Rome. His recent books include *A Grammar of the Multitude* and *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation.*



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